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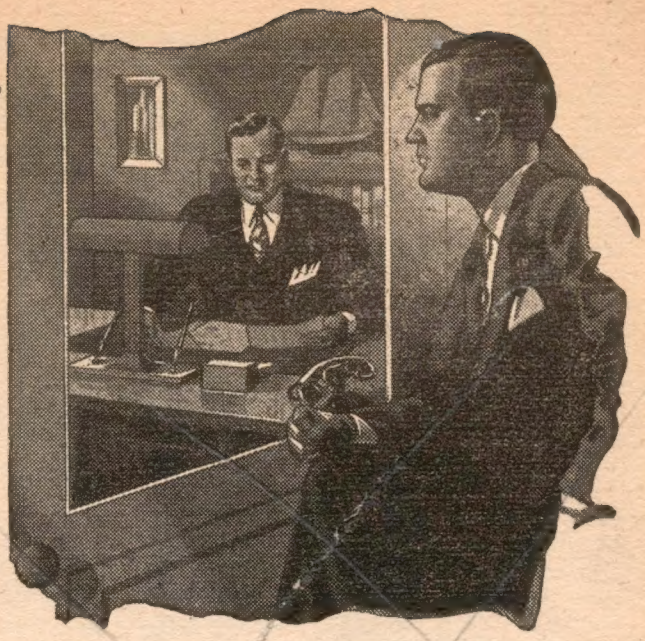

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Lem Adams and Reverend Carter join in a gunsmoke showdown against killers!

FEATURES

THE CHUCK WAGON ***by Foghorn Clancy*** **6**
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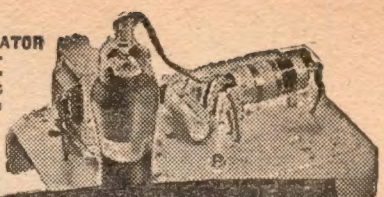

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Conducted By FOGHORN CLANCY

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HI, waddies, welcome again to the Chuck Wagon! After having this rangeland cafeteria parked at the New York and Boston rodeos, we have driven it down to Florida way where there are to be a number of rodeos staged this season, in fact more than there have ever been down this way before.

The 1945 rodeo season having been one of the biggest in the history of the game, rodeo promoters and producers have had their eyes on Florida since V-J day, knowing that the war-tired and travel-hungry public would hit the land of the palms in great numbers.

The first of a series of Florida rodeos was staged in the stadium at Jacksonville, December 14th to 16th, under the auspices of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and was produced by Tommy Horner and associates.

Off to a Good Start

This inaugrated the winter season of rodeos in this state and was followed by a number of others.

It was rather early for rodeos in Florida, but visitors and vacationists were expected earlier this year, and this guess proved correct, as droves of motorists flocked south. So many, in fact, that tourists' overnight lodging places were filled early each evening and the wise motorists began stopping even before sundown and looking for a place to spend the night.

The hotels were and are, like they seem to be everywhere else, always fully occupied.

Sometimes a fellow trying to get hotel reservations in most any city wonders where all the people come from. It seems from the great number of people in the cities that there must be few left on the farms and ranches, and the question now is the same as it was at the close of the Frst World War: "How are you going to keep 'em down on the farm?"

Twin Falls Show

Harry Powell, the rodeo producer of Hayward, California, produced an excellent rodeo at the Twin Falls County Fair at Filer, Idaho.

The final results in bareback bronc riding were: First, Bud Linderman; Second, Bill Linderman; Third, Jack Wade; Fourth, Bob Burrows.

Bud and Bill Linderman, two brothers who have been running practically neck and neck in the season's title race, ran practically the same way in this contest.

Bud copped the saddle bronc riding finals, and Bob Burrows squeezed into second place, beating Bill Linderman to it by a few points, thus foreing Bill to be content with third place. Chuck Sheppard was fourth.

Jimmy Hazen won the bull riding, Manuel Enos was second, Johnny Christ was third and Bill Selby was fourth.

Jack Wade was best man in the steer wrestling, Steve Heacock took second place, Bill Linderman was third and Dave Campbell fourth.

In the Calf roping Dick Anderson led the field to the final wire, Pud Adair was second, Ray Ross was third and Charley Francher was fourth.

A Nevada Rodeo

In the Fallon, Nevada, Rodeo, there were no finals in the bronc riding, but the winners of the third go-round were: First, Don Landis; Second, Mitch Owens; Third, Jim Egan; Fourth, Clarence Clark.

Had there been a final score the winner

(Continued on page 8)

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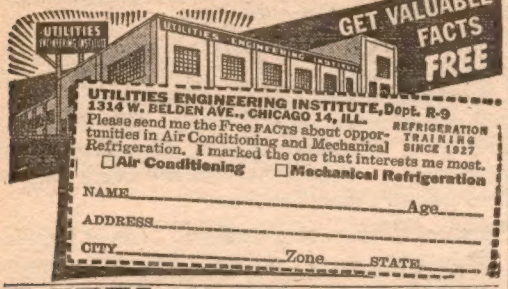

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THE CHUCK WAGON

(Continued from page 6)

would have been Mitch Owens, as he tied with three other contestants for a split of third and fourth prizes on the first day, won first place on the second day and second place on the third day.

In the finals of the bareback riding Jim Egan was the winner, while Warren Westbrook, Mitch Owens, Don Landis, Claude Sheehan and Mel Autry tied for and split second, third and fourth prizes.

Allie Amelli copped the steer wrestling, Levi Frazie was second, Archi McIntosh was third and Ambrose Rosaschi was fourth.

Mitch Owens was the winner of the bull riding, Jim Egan was second, Richard Conley third and Claude Sheehan fourth.

Levi Frazier won the calf roping, Archi McIntosh was second, Al Skelton was third and Woodrow Rosaschi was fourth.

John Vance and Joe Richardson won the team tying finals, Al Skelton and Levi Frazier were second, Allie Amelli and Ambrose Rosaschi were third and Al Allen and Archi McIntosh were fourth.

Keen Competition at Wichita

Beulter Bros. staged an excellent rodeo at Wichita, Kansas, and due to the fact that it came just a couple of weeks ahead of the opening of the World's Championship Rodeo in Madison Square Garden, New York, it caught a lot of the talent enroute to the big show, with the result that the competition was unusually keen.

Vic Schwarz won the saddle bronc riding, Jack Wade was second, Gerald Roberts was third and Louis Brooks fourth.

Bill Hancock copped the bareback bronc riding, Louis Brooks was second, Jim White was third and Jess Like fourth.

Todd Whatley was best man in the bull riding, Gerald Roberts took second place, Barney Folsom was third and Frank Rowe was fourth.

Willard Smith won the calf roping, Bill Rush was second, Louis Brooks was third and Pat Parker was fourth.

Clyde Weir won the steer wrestling, Andy Curtis took second place, Louis Brooks was third and Wayne Dunafon was fourth.

Standing of Contestants

The standing in the season's championship race for the various titles under the point award system of the Rodeo Cowboys' Association, as compiled recently, is as follows:

Calf roping: 1st, Toots Mansfield, 9,129 points; 2nd, Homer Pettigrew, 6,450 points;

(Continued on page 106)

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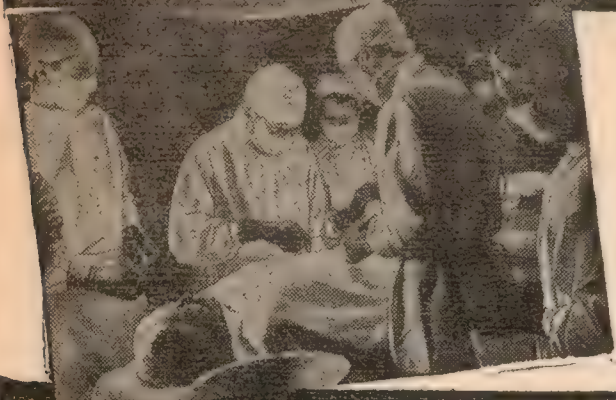

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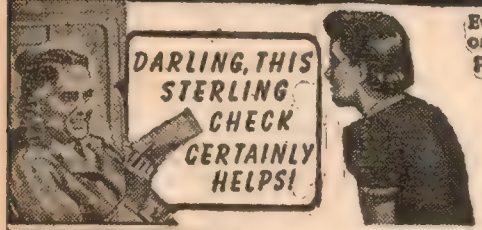

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Snow, cautiously checking up, saw the body of his cowboy (CHAPTER II)

LAND OF CHALLENGE

By TOM CURRY

Larry Snow, owner of a wide Texan domain, defies evil outlaw land-grabbers, killers and plunderers—and wages a grim war against a mysterious bandit leader who terrorizes the range!

CHAPTER I

Threats

IT WAS late, and most of the Texas settlement of Lynxboro slept the sleep of the just—or just slept. But the yellow street lamps still burned, and there were a few diehard drinkers clinging to the bar of the Rope & Irons—Hugo Byers, Prop.—the largest saloon and gambling palace in town.

Three men in the back parlor also were wide awake and were making evil use of the quiet hours. The door into the corridor had been shut and the bolt drawn. It was handy to the entry which opened into the shadows

of Tin Can Alley.

"I sold a poor fool the last of that flatiron stretch today," the huge fat man, who was squatting on his chair like some vast, overstuffed idol was reporting.

He bulged from his black suit. His checked vest, garnished by a thick gold watch-chain and an elk's tooth fob, was partially unbuttoned to ease his sagging stomach. His head rested as on a cushion between his beefy shoulders, and he was apparently neckless. He had a wide black mustache, murky eyes, and black hairs grew thick from his large nose. They vibrated violently with his stertorous breathing. He sounded asthmatic, for his inhalations and exhalations were quite audible. The air was blue with the smoke of his black cigar.

"The more I think about it," said a conferee who sat at his left, "the shorer I am we got to have Snow's Square S. It'd be a gold mine."

The third man drew in his breath sharply, through his teeth, swore, and rapped his whisky glass on the table in anger.

"Snow! Cuss his hide! I'm goin' to kill that son first chance I get, gents."

"Yuh've got my permission," drawled the fat man. There was a hint of irony in his voice and his eyes were slitted as he regarded the ugly face of the man who made the threat. "Look out Snow don't kill you first, though, Wurtz."

"Apache" Wurtz was a lean man whose strong, angular body was clad in a sweated, dirty riding garb. His head came to a point, and his nose was long and sharp. His mouth was big, his eyes too small. All in all, he gave a gargoyle effect, accented by his scrubbing-brush tow hair and right-angle ears.

He held up his left arm. It was bare, and there were scars on it that were still in the process of healing. The forearm was out of line. Perhaps a broken bone had not been correctly set.

"See this?" he growled. "Aches me all the time. Snow done that. And cuss it, Hugo, he shot yore own brother, didn't he? Looks to me like yuh ought to be gunnin' for him yoreself."

THE bulky shoulders shrugged.

"Gunnin' Snow ain't my style—not in the open anyway, Wurtz. I never do anything the Law might object to."

"Not in public anyways," Wurtz said, grinning wryly. "You savvy danged well yuh'd shoot Larry Snow in the back if yuh got a chance, and didn't figger yuh'd be strung up for it."

"All right, all right, forget the argyment," ordered the third man testily. "We all want to see Snow downed. But I got ambitions, too. We got a nice game started and I hate to see it broke up." He stopped short and coughed meaningly, winking at the fat man. "I heard a board creak," he whispered. "Go on talkin'!"

Byers immediately began, "Well, no reason why we shouldn't keep goin'. Apache's back and he's got some new boys, while I've got my own bunch behind me. I'll do anything to even up with Snow on my brother Curly's account."

The fat man's heavy voice went on, loudly. Wurtz sat quietly, but his eyes widened as he watched the other man, who had drawn a six-shooter and tiptoed to the open window. Byers talked steadily as the armed man went through the opening. After a minute of suspense, they heard a scuffling, a low curse in the hall.

"Open up, boys!" a voice out there ordered.

Wurtz unbolted the door, and a young fellow in cowboy clothing and a big brown Stetson came into the parlor, his hands shoulder high. A Colt was covering him from the rear.

"He's been listenin' at the door!" said the cowboy's captor. "Heard everything we said, I reckon! Lucky I heard that loose board creak!"

"Why, that's Billy Mann, one of Snow's outfit!" cried Apache Wurtz.

Young Mann eyed the three men coolly but he was worried and chargined. His throat worked as he swallowed.

"I don't know what this is all about, gents," he said levelly, "I was on my way to pick up my hoss—when this hombre jumped me."

"Shut up!" A jab in the kidney with the Colt muzzle doubled Mann back. "Yuh was spyin' on us! Snow ain't as dumb as we thought. He planted yuh in town to watch Byers, didn't he?"

"Yuh're right!" growled Byers. "This feller wasn't in the bar when I come back here a few minutes ago. He sneaked in from the alley, prob'ly when he seen you or Wurtz come in! This is bad!"

"What yuh jabberin' about, anyways?" demanded Mann, trying to brazen it out. "I was in town for a spree and come in for a last drink. I ain't been doin' nothin' else."

Hogshead Hugo Byers was addressing the gathering as they ate and drank (CHAPTER XIII)

"Go for yore gun, yuh dirty spy!"

Billy Mann had no chance at all. His opponent was behind him, with the six-shooter already in firing position. Mann, knowing he had been fatally trapped, made a last-minute attempt to whirl, to fight for his life, but his hand hardly touched the stock of his pistol when he died on his feet.

Only one shot was necessary, at such close range. The killer could not miss. His teeth gritted as he pulled trigger. The bullet ranged into the cowboy's heart and he fell to the rough board flooring.

"Hugo," ordered the killer, "get out in the hall and cover us, while Apache and me take care of the body. Pronto, now. We'll have to make shore no more of Snow's men are around. . . ."

Morning had come when Larry Snow started to ride out of the Square S, and his eye was caught by a bit of paper fluttering from the gate post. He stopped and pulled it loose.

Words on it read:

Yu skunk Yu di fur wat yu dun tu Curly

A smile played around Snow's lips as he read what was on the soiled paper. The sentiments amused him as much as the spelling.

He knew who had sneaked up in the darkness to leave the threat against his life. It would be the bandit, Apache Wurtz, or some of his crew, remnants of Curly Byers' band.

Snow's blue eyes, somber when he was not laughing, swept the hills of his range. They were dark with stands of yellow pine and spruce. It was a wild section, with brush-choked canyons and many excellent hiding places up there, for men who needed to hide.

Danger and challenge exhilarated Snow. His heart now picked up a beat as he murmured, "We'll see about that."

A man had to be tough to carve out a big chunk of range and hold onto it, to make a go of ranching in central Texas, as Snow had done. He had just turned twenty-six, and he owned or controlled everything as far as he could see. Sometimes he needed to unship his field-glasses to reach the visual limits of his proud expanse. And he had started from scratch when he was fourteen and had gone to work for the Gregory brothers who had a big spread in the Panhandle.

SNOW'S sturdy legs were cased in brown leather. His blue shirt was clean, and a bandanna hung at his throat. His wide-brimmed Stetson, curving a bit at each side, shaded his face from the sun as he rode away from his home in the hills where the river had its birth—a river which gave his land life. It watered the vegetation, and the animals which lived on the land.

Young Snow had a strong face, with a firm though mobile mouth, but the symmetry of the bronzed countenance was somewhat marred by a thickening of his nose at the bridge. In his early youth he had sometimes joined in the sprees of the older men, and once when he got into a quarrel a beer bottle had connected with his nose. In healing, scar tissue had been left.

While it had been healing, Snow had formed a habit of stroking the bridge gingerly, between thumb and forefinger. It was a habit which had never left him. Even now, when thinking deeply, he unconsciously performed the same action.

He rode on, touching up his black which he had facetiously named Tar Baby. Reaching a height about a mile to the east of the ranch buildings, he reined in for another sweeping look over the range. Snow enjoyed that, never tiring of looking at his possessions and his handiwork. From where he sat his horse he could see bunches of cows, his own, grazing here and there, or standing knee-deep in the river shallows as they drank. It was a grand sweep, and seeing it gave him deep satisfaction, for it was all his. He had carved it all out himself. Besides the water range he had many sections of grassland; and the cool water, his stream, furnished the best drinking water for miles around.

He cocked one leg over the pommel of his saddle as he rolled a smoke, and thought about Apache Wurtz, and about the Byers brothers. Curly was dead now, but his brother, a gambler who owned a place in Lynxboro, twenty miles southeast of Snow's Square S, was very much alive. As far away as the town was, Snow could sense the hatred of "Hogshead Hugo" Byers there as plainly as if the man were here on the range.

After Snow and his cowboys had terminated Curly's ungraceful career there had been threats from the gambler, retailed to Snow. As a matter of simple precaution since then, Larry Snow was always watchful of his rear while in Lynxboro after dark. And he had even detailed Billy Mann, one of his

trusted men, to keep an eye on Hugo Byers. Mann had a sweetheart in Lynxboro, a waitress, and the cowboy spent as much time as he could in town.

It was two days since Snow had heard from Billy Mann. But the season was slack, and Mann no doubt found it hard to part with his lady friend.

Larry Snow grew alert as he saw dust rising over the dirt road which led toward the ranch. That might mean friends approaching, or it could be enemies.

From the amount of dust, he didn't think it was a single rider, so probably it wasn't Billy Mann.

In view of the threat he had just found on the gate post, Snow decided to check up. As he started Tar Baby in that direction, though, Hugo Byers was still in his thoughts —and Curly Byers. He was recalling how Curly had made use of his, Snow's, forests—of course without his sanction. Curly and his bandits had crossed his range at night when they had headed for the forests, and for a time their interests had not conflicted with Snow's.

But finally Curly and his pig-headed lieutenant, Apache Wurtz, had trod on Snow's toes. They had bumped into one of the rancher's riders after a spree celebrating a hold-up done at some distant point, and had shot down the cowboy in a fit of drunken frenzy.

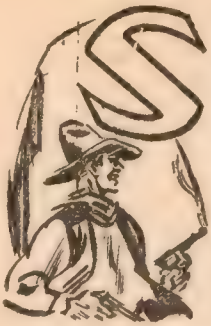
Snow, with his fighting cowboys, had at once taken to the field and pursued them to their lair. Snow himself had caught Curly Byers and in a duel had killed the outlaw chief in the brush-choked passes to the south. He and his men had winged Apache Wurtz and one or two more, and had chased the outlaws for many miles in the running fight.

Three had been captured, and turned over to Sheriff "Toffy" Drew in Lynxboro. That had been weeks before, and this note Snow had found was the first he had heard of the survivors, who, no doubt, had been licking their wounds in some hide-out.

Even though intent on the long rolls of dust on the road, which was off to the left, Larry Snow did not miss the buzzards who hung in the blue sky, over the long ridge a half mile away, to the right. He wondered a little about their numbers. Though of course carrion attracted these birds, they might have located only a dead rabbit, or it might be a cow.

CHAPTER II

Gruesome Discovery



SOMETHING startled Larry Snow out of his subconscious even as it droned past his head. Even as he heard the sound, he knew it to be a bullet, almost spent. The dull thud came from a slight rise on his left, and he glanced quickly to the right, at the ridge. Scrub brush covered its spine, and the less precipitous lower reaches were clothed in evergreens. The drygulcher was up there, probably had been hoping that Snow would turn and come closer so he could try another shot. But Snow had veered from the path he had been following, toward the road.

"I'll see to you later," he muttered tightly.

It would be stupid to go tearing up to the ridge. Either the would-be killer would decamp or he would have plenty of help up there against Snow.

When he reached a point from which he could survey a section of the road, he tried his field-glasses again. From the rolling dust emerged a team of chestnut geldings, drawing a wagon which had a couple of adjustable board seats in it and a canvas top to ward off the sunlight. Snow recognized who was driving—a man named Jake Muller.

"Now what's he want?" mused Snow.

He stroked his nose as he kept Tar Baby moving to meet the wagon. He disliked intruders, and hoped these people had no such intention. He was certain, though, that he was protected from crowding on his range. To that end he loved to be on the go all the time, to see that no one squatted on his land. For that matter, young Snow loved to be on the go anyhow, for he seldom alighted from his horse for long at a time. He ran all the excess fat off his body by expending his energies this way.

It suited Snow, though, to be out on his range all the time. For such a young man, he enjoyed solitude, and needed a lot of it. Almost always he was alone, though now and then he rode to town on a party with some of his men.

He was waiting at the bend as the wagon rattled around it. The broad-bodied Jake

Muller, who called himself a contractor, was at the reins. There were three others with him; two men and a girl. Snow had a swift impression of a blue dress and a sunbonnet to match, of blue eyes and golden hair, and youth. Then he looked away, and became busy sizing up the men.

Tar Baby shied and the chestnut geldings reciprocated, but it was only showing off, for they were trained work horses. However, the mustang strain in them required this demonstration of independence, and neither Snow nor Muller took any notice of it. The other two men and the girl looked anxious, though, and clung to their seats.

"Mornin'!" sang out Snow.

"Howdy, there, boy," Jake Muller boomed back.

Muller was not so tall as Snow, but he weighed fifty pounds more, for he was broad all the way down through his barrel chest and heavy legs. He had a round head, and short brown hair. His ears were thick and one was twisted. His eyes were light-blue. Muller owned a small ranch not far from town, but made his living principally by digging wells, running irrigation ditches and building foundations—his "contracting business."

He could construct a road or clear land. There was little, in fact, that he could not do with these square, strong hands of his which were holding the oiled black reins.

He was wearing corduroy pants now, and a brown shirt open at his hairy throat. His hat was set back, showing the sweat-matted hair on his brow. He was drawing on a stubby briar pipe held between his wet lips.

"Meet Fred Varis and George Ulman, Snow," he said expansively. "Hugo Byers sold 'em that flatiron section that bulges into yore east range. They wanted to talk to you, so I brung 'em along." Muller had about him an air that seemed to intimate that he wished Snow to understand it wasn't his fault.

The elderly man seated by the girl got down, followed by the other one. The older man was smiling widely as he came up to Snow and held out his hand.

"I'm Fred Varis, Mr. Snow, your new neighbor," he said. "This is George Ulman, another one. There are half a dozen of us, altogether, all with families, hoping to settle near you. I'm mighty glad to know you. Ulman and I have been delegated to speak to you in our behalf."

Varis wore a neat dark suit and a clean shirt. His black hat had a narrow brim. He had on shoes instead of boots. His face was rather pale, his whiskers gray, as was his hair. He did not look too strong or healthy.

Snow frowned coldly at the man. He concealed the shock which had passed through him at the news that these folks, pilgrims from their looks, had purchased the flatiron stretch from Hugo Byers. He was greatly disturbed, for he had never believed that the land in question, which was arid and unimproved, would attract settlers.

He placed his right hand on his thigh, ignoring Varis's outstretched one.

"So yuh bought that section. It ain't much account, mister."

VARIS stopped smiling. His feelings were hurt by Snow's snub but he was not the fighting type.

"Well, sir," he said quietly, "I know somethin' about dirt, and George here and the others understand it even better. That earth only needs water for us to grow bumper crops."

He looked at Ulman, who nodded. George Ulman, a thin man with a drooping brown mustache and deep-set eyes, looked like a dirt farmer. He seemed to be a man who said little, contenting himself with listening.

"I see," said Snow. "Yuh goin' to tote pails from Lynxboro? It's only fifteen, twenty miles from where yuh'll be livin'. The few springs that crop up thereabouts go dry in summer."

Varis understood the sarcasm. He glanced back at the wagon, as though for encouragement, but Muller's face was still noncommittal.

"Well, anyhow, that's why we're here, Snow," said Varis, maintaining his good nature. "We've bought the land, and we've been told since that the springs often don't hold up through the growin' season. But by runnin' a canal from the river we'd have plenty of water for our purposes. We want to grow truck crops generally—cabbages, beets, maybe spinach. And corn and alfalfa."

"I savvy," Snow said shortly. "Did yuh ever stop to think I mightn't like nesters and farmers, and don't cotton to folks who horn in where they ain't wanted? I'll tell yuh this: if yuh stick a shovel in my land I'll see to it yuh never pluck another spinach!"

Snow was stirred up, irritated. So often he had congratulated himself on being safe

from instrusion from any point of the compass, and here were greenhorns who would erect fences which might injure Snow's cattle, and then sue for damages when the animals broke through into the inviting crops.

Not only that, but Snow saw behind it all the fine hand of his enemy, Hogshead Hugo Byers, for Byers had picked up the dry stretch cheap some time before. If only to annoy Snow, he had sold it off in parcels to these fools. They must be fools, he thought, to have bought land without the assurance of good water. That was the prime consideration of every experienced cowman, in Texas or out. Farmers needed water even more than ranchers did. The stock of farmers couldn't move about freely to drink as other animals could.

"I'm sorry you feel this way, Mr. Snow," said Varis. "Will you think it over—don't say no right now?"

"I've already thought it over," snapped Snow. "Before you ever come here."

Varis nodded and turned away, his head down, his shoulders sagging. Followed by the taciturn Ulman, he returned to the wagon and climbed to the seat.

"Told yuh he'd say no, Varis," Muller said, his voice loud enough for Snow to hear. "He's king of the mountain in these parts. Yuh'll have to go a long way round if yuh want water from the river."

Muller turned the team. The outer wheels slid off the road shoulder, squealing, the body tipping, so that the occupants of the wagon had to hold tight to keep from falling out. Snow was scowling as he watched them drive off.

He rode across toward the ridge, galloping Tar Baby. He was angry, but still he felt vaguely miserable, as though he were in the wrong about it all.

"What's the matter with me?" he growled.

But his eyes were on the ridge, from which the shot had come. The buzzards were not in sight, and he decided they must have settled. He wanted to see what had drawn them, so he went the long way around, and on foot, his carbine up and ready in his hands, and finally reached the spot. The ungainly, ugly birds rose, complaining in a raucous chorus, from a long object lying there in the sandy dirt.

Snow, cautiously checking up, moved

Though the outlaws kept doggedly after them, Snow and Ames began to outdistance Wurtz and his gang (CHAPTER VI)

closer. And moments later he was squatting over the body of his cowboy, Billy Mann. . . .

The noon meal was over when Larry Snow reached his Square S. Though it was a hot day, the low-slung house of pine slabs outside, with a squat chimney of native stone, the bunkhouse and other buildings, shaded by giant evergreens which grew from the hillside looked cool and inviting.

Over the ranch hung summer's brooding peace. The voices of the men around were pitched low, and the horses in the corrals as well as the hounds asleep in the warm dirt near the stone stoop, were quiet in the heat.

Up here the little river rose from several large springs and rills. There was a fine view. For Snow had picked out the site of his home with an artistic eye. He loved to look out over the country.

It was an outfit composed of men only. Pedro, a Mexican, did the general cooking, although now and then Snow, who fancied himself as an amateur chef, would shake up something out of the ordinary. There also were a good many riders, as befitted a range so big.

AS SOON as Snow rode in, he took care of Tar Baby. Then he went around to the front porch and entered the ranchhouse. He wanted to think things over before he told his men of his gruesome discovery, for he was vastly disturbed. The men had not yet seen him, for they were smoking outside the bunkhouse, on the shady side, so he would be alone.

In the living room, Snow took off his belt holding the heavy six-shooters, and his hat. He sank into his easy chair which faced the now empty fireplace, and filled a pipe from his rack.

It was an entirely masculine room. There was a straw mat on the oak floor, tables, benches, oil lamps, and a picture here and there on the walls, some of them cut from magazines and portraying girls who ran strong to dazzling teeth and legs. In a corner were a couple of saddles, and on hooks hung Mexican silver bits, stirrups, quirts and the like.

A rack against the wall held Snow's collection of firearms, and in this were many carefully cared-for and oiled weapons. There was a long-barreled .50-caliber Sharps, which Snow had bought from a former buffalo hunter; a couple of carbines, a target rifle, engraved English shotguns, and other expensive fine pieces of which Snow was proud. Several pistols, some of them worthy of being in a museum, occupied a special rack. He had old single shooters, Frontier models, and others, up to the very latest of revolvers.

Old hunting jackets, Stetsons, chaps, and other riding equipment hung in an open alcove near the rear. Typical bachelor's quarters, indeed, and home to Snow.

As Snow sat smoking before the cold fireplace the familiar sounds of the place did not filter through his painful reverie. He was deeply shocked and saddened by Billy Mann's untimely death, and meant to run down his killer immediately. That was a foregone conclusion. But something else was troubling him. His mind kept reverting to Fred Varis and to the scene when he had so rudely refused the farmer's request to be allowed to run a canal to the river through his land.

He was drawing on a cold pipe when a slim young man with brown eyes and tow hair came through from the rear of the house and stopped in the doorway, grinning at him.

"Say, Larry," he said. "Pedro wants to know if yuh're ever goin' to eat. Chuck's cold now."

Snow nodded, but he was frowning as he regarded the young rider—Hachie Ames, his friend as well as his employe. Ames was a good-natured young fellow. He loved Snow, and probably was closer to him than any of the other men. He acted as Snow's segundo when required.

Ames also fancied himself as something of a cowboy dandy. Right now he wore fancy clothing, a checkerboard shirt, a silk bandanna, and his pants had cost him two months' wages.

He went in for dandified dressing, much more than Snow even, who always was pretty proud of his appearance.

Snow and Hachie thoroughly understood one another, however, and when Hachie saw Snow's grim look he stopped smiling and sat down.

"What's wrong?" he asked quietly.

"I found Billy Mann's body on Sladbone Ridge," Snow said grimly. "He was shot in the back two, three days ago. Can't say who done it—but Apache Wurtz and his gang are back in these parts. Here's a billy-doo they left me."

He tossed the threatening note to Ames. Hachie read it soberly, and looked up.

"I thought Mann was in town," he remarked.

"They could've drygulched him on his way home, couldn't they? Anyhow, I didn't have the time to check up. They took a long one at me and I had to hightail—for the time bein'. Wurtz is sore about Curly and the others. Mann was in that scrap when we cleaned them lobo bandits out."

Hachie waited, studying his friend.

"What else?" he asked at last. "I know you ain't told it all."

"Kick me, Hachie!" Snow said grimly.

"For what more'n usual?" asked Hachie dryly.

"For not buyin' that flatiron stretch two years ago when I had the chance. I was short of cash at the time, and I figgered I was smart, that nobody in his right mind would go to the expense and trouble of settlin' there. So I saved a few hundreds, and danged if dirt farmers ain't bought it from Hogshead Byers! I'd heard Byers had taken it over, got it cheap from the owner."

"Well, dang my hide! I savvy. Hugo Byers must have brought them nesters in to make you plumb boilin' mad."

"That's how I figger it. Made a few dollars for hisself, too. They had the nerve to ask me could they dig a canal to the river, straight across my range!"

Hachie whistled. "I s'pose yuh welcomed 'em with open arms. Where'd all this happen?"

"Jake Muller's their contractor on the waterway they want to build. He drove a couple of 'em over this mornin' and I met 'em on the road." After a brief pause, Snow added, "There was a female with 'em."

"Well, I don't know." Ames missed the last, for he was thinking about the dead Mann and the disturbing news that farmers were coming in. "If yuh don't let 'em cross yore land, Larry, they'll have to go way around for any water from the river. Mebbe the expense'll discourage 'em and yuh can buy the flatiron stretch when they're busted."

Snow's eyes were somber.

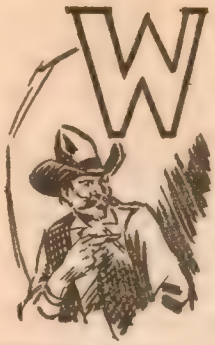
His domain was being invaded and he had a baffled feeling.

"Muller'll get their money, what's left of it, I s'pose, by digging that canal," he said. "I'm a fool, Hachie."

"Even fools got to eat," Ames said briskly, as he arose. "Come on yuh look peaked."

CHAPTER III

Friends



WHILE the boss was eating his dinner, Hachie Ames and the others made ready to travel. A light wagon was brought out and a pair of bays hitched to it. Cowboys were checking their six-shooters and carbines and saddling up. Hachie issued spare ammunition to them.

It was four P.M. when Snow and Ames, with six of their riders, reached the spot where Billy Mann's body lay. Larry Snow had covered it with his poncho and weighted the margins with heavy rocks to keep off the buzzards. In a blanket they carried the remains to the wagon, and Pedro started back to the ranch, where four cowboys had been left on guard. There was always a chance that Apache Wurtz might try to draw them all off or keep watch for when the home ranch was deserted, and then hit the place.

The chase for the outlaws they were sure had killed Mann was long and fruitless. They spent the night in the brush-choked canyons, and went on at dawn. But the sign petered out and the four bandits who had been on Shadbone Ridge had split up, taking different directions. After a twenty-four hour run, Snow called a halt. The horses were scratched by thorns and one had picked up a stone and gone lame. The men were worn out, too.

"We could go on like this for a month, boys," Snow told them soberly. "They ain't at any of their old hide-outs—that's shore—and there's a million more holes to look into. I reckon we'll hear more of Wurtz later, and get another whack at him."

Next morning, in the fresh cool of the new day, Larry Snow breakfasted with his men. He had slept from utter exhaustion and he had hoped to find some peace of mind, but on awakening he had discovered he was still greatly perturbed.

He was unaccountably restless, so he saddled up Tar Baby and rode out for a few miles, but soon came back. Hachie Ames and the men were at work not far from the buildings, but he did not go near them.

He still wanted to be alone.

When they came in at noon, Snow said to Ames:

"I figger we ought to report Mann's killin' to the sheriff, Hachie. I'm goin' to ride to town after dinner."

Ames shook his head. "Not alone, yuh're not. Hugo Byers has made threats again yuh. Yuh savvy that."

"I savvy," Snow growled. "I ain't afraid of Byers. I only wish he would make a move against me."

"Hugo's too crafty for that, till he's ready." Hachie shook his head. "I'm goin' along with yuh. I'll bring three, four of the boys, too, for a bodyguard."

Snow was just as well satisfied to have his men along. He rode beside Hachie, and they talked as they moved along on the dirt road which wound toward Lynxboro. Behind them came four armed cowboys—"Arizona" Kegg, "Shorty," "Mex" and Frankie Ince. They were young fellows in leather and big hats, bronzed, carefree, with sworn devotion to the man for whom they worked, their boss, Larry Snow.

They came on a new trace which branched from the main road on their right. They were off Snow's range, though the direct route south to the river would have brought them back on it again, onto the wide finger of land which cut off the flatiron stretch from the water.

The flatiron thrust its blunt, narrowing peninsula of brownish earth into Snow's eastern boundary. A series of wavelike undulations, rounded hillocks known as the Domes, cut off the view. Rocks thrust themselves upward from their crusted surfaces, and there was brush, with here and there a stunted tree. The section had little water.

The fresh wagon tracks disappeared in the Domes, and not too far off, in the azure sky, showed a stain of smoke.

Hachie Ames pulled up his gelding and blinked as Snow turned Tar Baby off the road onto the sandy trace.

"Where you goin'?" Ames demanded.

Snow said, over his shoulder, "I'm goin' in to them Domes and see what them farmers camped in there are up to."

Hachie was surprised, but he followed Snow, and the other cowboys strung along, smoking and chatting as they rode.

Snow didn't say anything about it, but he was as surprised as Hachie that he was heading for the farmers' camp.

"What's the matter with me?" he thought.

His heart had picked up a beat, was pounding furiously, and cold sweat came out on him. The trip to Lynxboro didn't seem important now.

The Domes were all about them, but in between the rises the country was flat and low. A canal from the Coolwater, with its intake upstream a bit, would have a gravity feed to the lower portions, the flats which Fred Varis and his friends intended to farm.

A mile from the road, Snow rode around a hill and past it lay the camp. Tents stood beside a shallow pond—mostly rain water—a spot which Snow knew well enough, since he had chased stray cows through here.

Under canvas tarpaulins lay piles of gear and equipment—old trunks and boxes, barrels, ploughs, harrows and other items that had been dumped from the transport wagons. Jake Muller had freighted them in from the railroad at Coffeetown, twenty miles south of Lynxboro. The stocky contractor was at the moment unloading bales of hay, designed no doubt to feed the heavy farm horses belonging to the farmers.

Snow's alert eyes swept the camp. He saw Varis, sitting on a box on the shady side of the tent, working at something. Snow rode over and dismounted, facing Varis.

"Howdy, Varis," he said.

Varis looked up, nodded. But a slim girl quickly emerged from the open tent flap and placed herself between the rancher and Varis. She stood there defensively, as though distrusting Snow's intentions.

"What do you want with my father?" she demanded. "He hasn't done you any hurt."

There were other women about, young and middle-aged, and children, families of the immigrants. But Snow had eyes only for the Varis girl, as the sun was reflected in her thick golden hair, damp strands of which were brushed off her flushed cheeks. Her large eyes were amber, but they darkened as she faced Snow, her chin up. She was a small girl of about nineteen or twenty, perfectly formed and blooming with youth and health.

"I—I'm not here to hurt yore dad or anybody else," said Snow. He was amazed at the trouble he had in speaking to her, and at the confusion in his usually clear mind. "I rode over to say I'm sorry I was so short the other day, and to tell yuh to go ahead and run yore canal across my range. It's all right with me."

He kept his eyes riveted to hers, and suddenly he saw her relax and a smile touch her red lips.

"That's very good of you," she murmured. "We're glad to see you, Mr. Snow."

Fred Varis smiled, too. He rose and held out his hand to Snow.

"Mighty white of you, Mr. Snow, I must say. We want to be friends and we promise never to cause you any trouble. It'll save us a lot of woe if we can run that waterway direct to the river."

"Right—never mind the thanks, Varis."

Now Larry Snow realized why he was there. He had been irresistibly drawn, by a

The blast nearly unseated Larry Snow (CHAPTER XII)

force he had not suspected. When he had first met Varis, the girl had been sitting in the wagon. He had been engrossed in the talk with Varis and the men, but nevertheless his eyes had registered the girl's loveliness and he had been subconsciously aware of it. Billy Mann's death and the run after the outlaws had kept him busy, but at last his subconscious mind had come to the fore, driven him to see her, to look at her again. The restlessness he had experienced melted away, and he felt a glowing joy, just to be near her.

"Joan, fetch Mr. Snow a drink," ordered Varis.

Joan. He hadn't even known her name till now.

She had on a plain blue dress, and slippers, and Snow thought it was the loveliest garb any woman had ever worn.

He pulled up another box and sat down by Varis. Hachie Ames and the other cowboys waited for their boss as he spoke with the farmer.

Muller had seen them, and he walked over, a questioning frown on his face as he neared Snow.

"It's all right about the canal, Muller," said the rancher. "Go to it when yuh're ready to dig."

Muller blinked, surprised at the surrender. Ulman shuffled over to say hello, and Varis introduced others. There was Lewis Day, young and filled with boyish energy, in fresh overalls and straw hat; Al Greene, stolid and more mature, who had his wife and four growing children at the camp; and Ned Phillips, a small, sprightly fellow with a quipping tongue. They were dirt farmers, for the most part; not Larry Snow's sort at all, but hard-working small landholders.

Everybody quit work to gather around. The children stared at the spurred and armed cowboys in their colorful garb, at the mustangs which had to be held down because of the unfamiliar objects about them. Snow learned that Hugo Byers had sold the entire flatiron section in farm tracts and at a good profit, since it had been obtained en bloc for a song.

"Yuh ought to rip off that fat cheater's hide and dry it on the fence," observed the rancher, "for unloadin' land without decent water. I'd go after him if I was you."

Varis smiled, shaking his head. "We were green in this part of the world, and we were taken in by Byers. But as long as we can get water from the river, with your permission, we'll be fine."

At last Snow got up, realizing that it was time to leave.

"I'll be gettin' along now," he said, "but I'll be back and see how yuh're doin'."

JOAN came to him, to say good-by.

"I'm sorry I acted the way I did when you came, Mr. Snow," she murmured.

"Make it Larry, will yuh?"

"All right—if you'll call me Joan. But I've been worried about father, over his health. That's why we came to this country. He had a good business, a metals manufacturing company in St. Louis, but sold out because the doctors said he'd do better in a dry climate, working out-of-doors. He's always loved farming, so thought he'd try it."

"I see. Reckon yuh'll like it here and yore

dad'll do well. It's healthy country."

When she looked up at him like she did as she shook hands with him, Larry Snow felt a confused joy—but now he knew what ailed him.

He rode silently, at the head of his men, toward Lynxboro. Honest with himself now, he realized that the trip to town had been, for the most part, an excuse to see Joan Varis.

He could have sent Sheriff Toffy Drew a message.

Snow avoided Hachie's look for a time. Ames was a shrewd young fellow, and there was no doubt but that he had noticed the way Snow had looked at Joan Varis and spoken to her.

The sun was a huge red ball, apparently tangent to the heights where Snow's ranch lay, when they saw Lynxboro ahead. It stood on the river, its main water supply. There were several dirt streets, a wide plaza planted with live-oaks and other shade trees, and there were stores, a livery stable, and the homes of well-to-do citizens in well-kept yards.

On the south side of town was a jumble of wooden shacks, the Mexican quarter. There were half a dozen saloons, a large one, of two stories, occupying a central and dominant position. The sign outside it read:

THE ROPE & IRONS—HUGO BYERS, PROP.

Snow slowed Tar Baby and swung in his saddle to speak to his cowboys.

"Now I want you boys to stick together, savvy? Don't get drunk, and keep yore eyes peeled."

Hugo Byers was a tricky enemy, and there was no saying what the fat gambler might have planned as a welcome for Larry Snow.

There was no doubt in Snow's mind that ill happenings were in the making. They had been heralded by the finding of Mann's body. Then had come the mysterious note. Perhaps there wouldn't be another warning. Danger might strike fast.

If Hugo Byers knew the play that was in the making, the saloon owner certainly would not tip his hand. So there was little use in asking him flatly what was up. The only way was to call his bluff when the showdown came. Byers was mostly bluff. But when pushed into a corner, he could be as dangerous as a grizzly.

That went for Byers' friends, too.

CHAPTER IV

Suspicion

THE town hall and jail stood at the southeast corner of the plaza. Toffy Drew had his headquarters there. The cavalcade from the Square S headed for it.

Hachie Ames dropped to the rear, and the cowboys watched right and left as they moved down the middle of wide Central Avenue. Without incident they passed the Rope & Irons where saddle horses and a few teams stood at the racks. Music came from saloons, and the hum of the town made the mustangs dance and roll their eyes nervously.

"Hey there, Snow—Larry Snow!"

It was the livery stable man, Harry Fry, singing out to the rancher. Fry had a corral and a wooden stable near the center of the settlement. He had been sitting in a backless chair, leaning against his wall out front, and had seen Snow coming.

The rancher turned and Fry got up and came to speak to him.

"Say, I got one of yore hosses here," Fry said. "Billy Mann left him the other night. Reckon Billy must have eloped, or walked home. I ain't seen him round town since the night he left his hoss."

It was a moment before Snow realized the import of Fry's news. He was frowning as he rejoined Ames and his men.

"Hachie!" he called. "Mann's hoss is at Fry's; Yuh savvy what that means?"

Ames was staring at him, as Snow went on:

"Billy was shot here in town, taken out and dumped on the range, shore as yuh're born!"

"Huh!" Hachie said. "Yuh're right. Hugo Byers!"

Snow nodded, his lips grim. He sat his saddle for a time and his thumb and forefinger gingerly stroked his nose. He had a tough look when he was angry.

"I reckon, Hachie," he said after a while, "that we're s'posed to figger that Apache Wurtz downed Mann. There wasn't much they could do about the hoss that Billy left at Fry's, though—it's a giveaway. They

killed Mann in town the other night. Yuh savvy I asked Billy to keep an eye on Byers. Mebbe Hogshead caught him spyin' at the Rope & Irons."

"I think yuh got it, Larry," Hachie agreed soberly. "But Wurtz might have slipped into town after dark and shot him."

Hachie was correct. It was all conjecture, and Snow had no proof against Hugo Byers.

"But I'll get it," he told himself grimly.

Toffy Drew was in his living quarters at the rear of the office when the Square S arrived. He was a bachelor of around fifty, a lean lawman who wore tight-fitting black pants tucked into shiny half-boots which had a red lone star decorating each top, a blue shirt, and a vest to which was fastened his badge of office. His face was long, which, with his drooping brown mustache and deep-set eyes, gave him a lugubrious look, though he was known for his honesty.

He and Snow were friendly. Not only had Snow helped elect Drew, but Toffy was grateful because Snow and the Square S had cleaned out Curly Byers' bunch, which had caused him a lot of worry.

There was a bottle of whisky on the table, and a pot of coffee and a pan of mulligan stew on the stove. Drew had been about to sit down to eat.

"Stay and eat with me," he invited Snow.

"All right, I will," Snow said, and told Ames, "Take the boys over to Jesse's and get 'em some ham and eggs, Hachie. Stick together, though, and come back for me here in an hour, savvy?"

He ate with Toffy Drew and while they were at it, he told the officer all that had happened and what he had learned concerning Billy Mann. Drew swore a blue streak.

"I reckon Mann was downed here in Lynxboro all right," he said. "I heard Apache Wurtz had come back and I been watchin', but them lobos could sneak in after dark easy enough. A man can't be everywheres at once."

"If Wurtz killed Mann, then Hugo Byers put him up to it, Toffy," Snow said positively.

"I s'pose so. But Hugo's slippery. I never been able to catch him at anything wrong. Yuh want me to question him?"

Snow shook his head. "It'd only put 'em on guard more'n ever. We got no proof any of them killed Billy, Toffy."

"I'll keep an eye open," the lawman promised. "Yuh better watch yoreself, Larry, for Wurtz and Byers are both sore on account of yore downin' Curly Byers. You know how I'm fixed. So long as Hugo's in the clear I got to be careful."

"Yeah."

Snow was well aware that a sheriff was a political official. Unless he kept in favor with enough voters, he would not be in office long. Unless they could nail him to the wall, Hogshead Hugo Byers could swing a lot of votes. He was rich and he could furnish free drinks and cater to the general public.

NIGHT fell while Larry Snow was at Drew's. The sheriff lit a smoky oil lamp, and they drank and talked for a time, until Hachie Ames and the boys came from supper at the little restaurant down the street.

It was around eight P.M. when Larry Snow, backed by Hachie and his cowboys, approached the Rope & Irons, Byers' saloon and gambling establishment. Hachie went up on the wide veranda, and glanced over the batwings.

"Looks all right," he reported.

The coast seemed to be clear. At least there was no obvious mantrap set for them, so Snow led the way inside. He did not go to the long bar, which occupied the entire length of the right wall of the main saloon, but turned left and took up a strategic position at a round table in the far corner.

Hachie and the boys sat down and Snow banged on the table for service. A waiter came over to take their order.

Big gilt lamps hung from the ceiling rafters and around these centers of heat buzzed mosquitoes, flies and moths. A dozen drinkers, townsmen or strays from the range, hung on the bar. There were a few at other tables but the piano stool was vacant, for it was early and the Rope & Irons had not yet warmed up.

A quick-eyed man in a plain black suit and hat—the saloon's bouncer—slipped through a rear doorway. Hugo Byers was not in sight, but was still in his quarters, and Snow was pretty sure that the bouncer had gone to report the presence of the Square S.

It was in a spirit of bravado that Larry Snow had entered Byers' stronghold. One thing Snow had always feared, and that was that somebody would think he was afraid. He wanted to show Byers and anyone else in the game that he was not.

Men came drifting in—cowmen, citizens—

to spend a pleasant evening. There was a railed circle in which men and dance girls could dance for two bits a tune. Byers hired several young women.

Down the line were gambling tables where games of chance were going on. In the back were private rooms where big games took place. There was a free lunch counter at the other end of the long bar.

Just before nine o'clock, the piano player and violinist appeared, and made ready to play. Girls came downstairs wearing pretty clothes, Spanish combs in their hair, and much rouge.

One of them, a tall, slender girl, saw Snow and waved to him as she started across the saloon toward his table. She wore a spangled red dress and a stage head-dress was on her dark curls. Her features were animated, her eyes sparkling . She smiled at Snow.

"Hello, softie!" she said.

Snow took her hand and pulled her into a vacant chair.

"Sit down and have a drink with us, Marvene—that is, if yuh don't mind losin' yore job."

For a moment her eyes went grave, but then she smiled again, and it was with a trace of defiance.

"I'll drink with anyone I please," she said airily. "Hugo knows that. If he wants to fire me, thats' up to him. Plenty of work here and elsewhere."

What Marvene Young said was quite true. She was the star attraction at the Rope & Irons. She had a fine singing voice, could dance in a way which brought down such a house, and she was young—about Snow's own age. She had been friends with Snow for a year, ever since she had come to Lynxboro to work. Whenever he came to town, Larry had spent a lot of time with Marvene.

"I savvy I'm an old easy mark, Marvene," said Snow, as he sat with an arm around the back of her chair, "but why the special title of 'softie' yuh just give me? What've I done out of the ordinary?"

He had not missed the greeting. There had been an almost vehement note in the girl's voice. Marvene had been around. She was worldly, experienced and knew the ropes.

"Jake Muller was in earlier, for drinks," she said. "He told the bartender you'd given those new settlers permission to run a ditch across your range. The boys have no secrets from me—so that's it. See how much chance you have of hiding anything from Marvene?"

She was laughing, but her dark eyes, the lashes heavy with beads of mascara, were riveted to Snow's.

He was uncomfortable. He did not like to have his emotions bared. Marvene was too sharp. He could feel the warmth coming up into his cheeks and the more he sought to control his flush, the worse it grew.

The musicians struck up a gay lilt, and Hachie Ames leaped up and seized Marvene's wrist.

"Let's prance, honey!" he cried.

SNOW knew Hachie was trying to cover his embarrassment.

"Shucks," he mused, a bit rattled, "everybody seems to savvy how I feel, before I do myself."

Marvene resisted Hachie. "Later, Hachie," she said. "This is Larry's dance."

She led Snow to the dance floor and melted in his arms. She was an expert dancer, as light as a feather. She could talk to him now, without being overheard.

"I saw her, when she was in town, Larry," she said earnestly. "She's not good enough for you. One of the girls said, 'Look at Little Unconscious.' That's what they called her. She's rather cute, with those baby eyes and light hair, but she's—"

"Don't!" he broke in.

He caught a fleeting panic in her eyes. Then she was smiling again.

"Just the same, you'll have trouble with those farmers, Larry, letting them cut across your land," she insisted. "I never thought you'd soften up that way."

Obviously Marvene had concluded that Snow had given the settlers permission for the canal because he had been smitten with Joan Varis. And he couldn't find it in himself to deny this.

He was piqued. Marvene had tipped her hand about what she thought of him herself, and he was sorry. She had always seemed entirely satisfactory when he had wanted the companionship of a woman—until now. He had been fond of her, but never serious. Yet from the way she was behaving, she had obviously hoped he would be some time.

"Here comes Hugo," she said in his ear.

The obese gambler, proprietor of the Rope & Irons, waddled in from the rear. Byers was so huge he bulged out of his suit. His abdomen hung in folds, pushing at the fancy vest from which depended a thick gold chain decorated with an elk-tooth fob. His black

mustache had been freshly trimmed and waxed, his dark hair shone with pomade. Diamond rings caught the light as he placed a pudgy hand on the bar, looking over the gathering. He saved Snow for last.

"Watch yourself, Larry," Marvene whispered. "Hugo's sore as a boil. On account of Curly. He was drunk the other night and swore he'd see you paid for killing his brother. I warned you before—but you keep coming here, and I'll bet you're no more careful than you ever were."

Sheriff Toffy Drew entered the saloon and took a stand at the front of the bar. Hogshead Hugo moved around slowly, his breath asthmatic, as he nodded to customers. He had armed bouncers posted in the place, ready for any trouble that might crop up.

The very sight of Byers irritated Larry Snow. When Hugo caught his eye for a moment, he felt the hatred and hostility of the huge man, and a reciprocal dislike burned in his heart.

But it was Byers who first looked away. Larry Snow had a reputation for speed with a Colt, for toughness in facing his enemies, and Hugo Byers was well aware of it. His broad body made an easy target and he was slow in movement. He knew that in case of a fight he would fall, even if his men later downed Snow.

"He's afraid of me, Marvene," said Larry.

"Maybe he is, personally. But he's got plenty of power."

"The wrong kind of power," Snow remarked.

"It makes no difference what kind it is," Marvene said wisely. "It can hurt people I like. You are one."

Again Larry Snow caught her feelings, and he was embarrassed.

It was a bad sign.

CHAPTER V

Riderless Horse

BYERS went over and sat down at his favorite green – baize – topped table. The moment of tension, facing Snow, had passed. Players were waiting for Hugo. New decks of cards, chips, and pitchers of foaming beer were brought by service boys. Byers adjusted a green-celluloid shade over his murky eyes, and fixed his attention on the game.

The evening was warming up. A bearded cowman banged with his fist on his table.

"Hey, Marvene!" he shouted. "Let's have a tune!"

Whistles and raucous applause rose.

"I'll have to go," she said to Snow. "See you again—softie."

She crossed to the piano.

"Zing zang zou!" somebody howled. "Hit it up, Marvene!"

She smiled, raised her arm. She was a trained performer, perfectly at home in such a gathering. The pianist pounded out a jiggy, lilting tune, and she began to sing in a brassy soprano which suited everyone present perfectly:

Zing-a-ling-a-ling-ling, zing zang zou,
That means "I love you."
Zing-a-ling-a-ling-ling, zing zang zou!
Yes, I really do.
Now you could be a naughty boy
Or you could be Lord Fauntleroy,

[*Turn page*]

TOPS FOR QUALITY!

But zing-a-ling-a-ling-ling, zing zang zou,
That means "I love you!"

As she hit the "zing-a-lings," the crowd began to join in, roaring the silly words and stamping with their feet, keeping time with fists on the tables.

Zing-a-ling-a-ling-ling, zing zang zou
That means "I love you."
Zing-a-ling-a-ling-ling, zing zang zou,
Yes, I really do-o.
Now you could be an outlaw bold
Or you could have a heart of gold,
But zing-a-ling-a-ling-ling, zing zang zou
That means "I love you!"

Snow sat watching the fun, feeling out of it, for the first time. The merrymaking seemed empty, tawdry. He kept thinking about Joan, and her friends, their problems. He had plenty of his own, too.

The song kept crowding his brain, as the whole saloon shook with it:

Zing-a-ling-a-ling-ling, zing zang zou,
Yes, I really do!
Now you could love to sew and stitch
Or you could be a son-of-a-gun,
But zing-a-ling-a-ling-ling, zing zang zou,
That means "I love you-u!"

They kept it up for twenty minutes, as the choruses grew more and more ribald.

"Let's go, Hachie," said Snow. "I'm sort of tired—from the run after Wurtz, I reckon. There's nothin' interestin' doin' here. Byers don't choose to buck me—yet."

When Larry Snow got up, Hugo Byers was in the act of dealing a round of stud. The fat hand was checked in mid-air for a moment, the card held between thumb and forefinger. Hogshead had seen Snow move. Several quick-eyed men in black coats, wearing large six-shooters in open holsters, tensed and made ready for anything.

Snow knew Byers feared him, in a fair fight. He was feeling angry, because of Billy Mann, Apache Wurtz's return, and the hurt he had dealt Marvene Young without meaning to. He had intended to go to the door and leave when he got up, but he saw Byers start dealing again, after the waxed mustache and full lips had moved, touched by a dry smile. Byers had made a slighting remark, no doubt about the rancher, as the men at the table laughed. A couple glanced quickly at Snow.

Larry Snow turned, but instead of going to the exit, he went through the aisles to Byers' table. At least a dozen of the house men swung to cover him. Hachie Ames and the Square S cowboys spread out, a few yards off, as Snow reached Byers and stood so he could face the seated gambler.

"Say, Hogshead, I hear yuh're lookin' for me, makin' threats on account of Curly." Snow spoke in a loud, clear voice.

Byers slowly looked up at him. The mustache twitched.

"Trouble with you young fellers," he drawled, "is yuh go off half-cocked. I ain't even been thinkin' of yuh, Snow. Got more important deals in mind."

"I see." Snow kept his temper outwardly, but inwardly was boiling. He hated Byers now, knew the gambler was connected with the death of Billy Mann. "Such as gunnin' my cowboys, I s'pose," he blurted.

"What yuh mean by that?" demanded Byers, breath rasping.

"You savvy what I mean!" snarled Snow, the civilization rubbed off. "Yuh yeller-livered slob. I ought to—"

"Keep a civil tongue in yore head!" broke in Hugo.

FOR a moment, Snow thought that Byers meant to fight. The fat gambler was shaking with fury and his teeth ground together. Hachie Ames and the Square S men were watching like hawks, hands ready to fly to the six-shooters at their sides, ready to pin down the strong-arm guards in the saloon.

Marvene's voice stopped in the midst of a "zing-zang-zou." Others, seeing the two men facing one another, watched the scene.

It was up to Byers to start anything he dared. His men would not open up without a signal, no doubt prearranged. Hugo Byers dropped his hot eyes from Snow's, shifted uncomfortably. Suddenly Snow slapped Byers in the mouth.

A weird silence held the Rope & Irons in its grip after the sharp smack of Snow's flattened hand connecting with Byers' flesh sounded in the place. Byers' cheeks turned pasty, but the spot where Snow had hit him remained red.

"You—you—" choked Hogshead.

Surely he would fight. Snow was angry enough for anything, didn't care what came of it.

Hogshead Hugo pushed back his chair. But he turned from Snow as she got up, and

walked off without looking back again.

"Take it easy, Larry," growled Toffy Drew, who had hurried over from the bar.

Snow led the way from the saloon. There was no attempt made to attack him, to check his departure. The route to the horses was clear, and the Square S mounted and rode off on Central Avenue, with Ames close at Tar Baby's heels.

After a while, when Hachie figured that Snow had cooled off, he spoke to his boss.

"Nice evenin', huh?" He laughed.

"Hugo's right," growled Snow. "I went off half-cocked, Hachie. What good did all that do? I only told Byers I suspected he'd had Mann done in." The fact that he had made a show of himself in the Rope & Irons did not soothe Snow's ruffled ego.

They moved fast, heading for home under a half-moon. A cool wind came from the hills, blowing in their faces.

It was in the small hours of the morning when they got home, and they turned in at once, for they were all tired out. . . .

Larry Snow spent the next few days hard at work. There were always plenty of tasks to perform around a ranch, and if he ran short he could invent new ones. Now and then he would consult the sky over the Domes with his field-glasses, and sometimes he would sight a thin curl of smoke marking the camp-fires of the new settlers.

Snow had an ascetic streak in him. For days he would keep himself on a severe schedule, driving himself to a frazzle in order to turn his mind from something. But this time it didn't work. Nothing he did lessened the desire to be with Joan Varis. As time ran on, the urge to see her became a torture. He kept thinking of her, though he wasn't even certain of her features in the mental portrait he had of her. However, it was a roseate picture and the lure was too powerful to resist.

One morning he saddled up Tar Baby.

"I may not be in to supper, Hachie," he said simply.

Ames frowned. "Yuh mean yuh're ridin' so far yuh might not be able to get back?"

"Reckon so."

"In that case I'm goin' too," Hachie said positively. "Wurtz is around and after what yuh done to Hogshead, I ain't takin' any chances."

"I don't need a wet nurse," flared Snow.

"Shucks! You can't fool me. Either I ride with yuh or I'll dog yuh. Yuh might as well have company on the way to that nester camp."

"All right," Snow said grouchily. "Tag along. But yuh ain't welcome."

They rode together, to strike the road. There had been a thunder shower the evening before and the earth was still damp. The dust had been laid by the heavy fall of rain. Water had collected in shallow ditches and depressions, though the thirsty earth was sopping it up fast. The dry season was at hand, when there would be no wet spots save along the river or where there were permanent springs.

They came to the stony, winding dirt road and moved along it for a time, passing the spot where Snow had first met Fred Varis and had seen Joan, the day the settlers had come to ask about running the canal across Square S range.

"Funny," mused Snow, "I didn't think I'd even seen her. But she cast her spell just the same."

"Lookit!" exclaimed Hachie suddenly.

SNOW glanced south, the way Ames was pointing. A brown gelding, with a saddle askew on its back, was grazing a few hundred feet off the highway. Hachie was interested because of the saddle. Then Snow grew interested.

"That's no mustang, either, Hachie," he said. "Looks like a plug."

"Mebbe he run off from yore friends' camp," said Hachie.

"Might be one of Muller's work animals," suggested Snow.

They turned off the road, picking up speed to catch the stray. He raised his head when he heard them, and watched as they approached. He shook his mane and snorted in a coltish, coy manner, and started to run away. But it was easy for the expert riders to overtake the slow-moving creature and head him off. It wasn't even necessary to rope him, for as soon as they came abreast of him he stopped and waited docilely for them to seize his reins.

Some dark spots on the leather and on the brown coat, caused Snow to dismount and look more closely.

"What do yuh think, Hachie?" he said soberly. "That's blood all over him, ain't it?"

Ames shrugged. "Looks like it, Larry."

"Looks like there's been an accident. We better check up."

CHAPTER VI

Death on the Range

VAGUE uneasiness had caught hold of Snow. He did not know to whom the brown horse belonged, yet he felt greatly worried. The saddle was not the ornate, high-pronged cowboy type, but a McClellan, used in the East and in cavalry circles.

Both Square S men were expert trackers. They quickly familiarized themselves with the gelding's hoofprints, and began to backtrack. For a time, it was the wandering, aimless path a riderless horse takes in grazing, stopping at one clump of grass, seeing another a little further off.

The sun was hot and yellow, drying the ground. A gentle south wind touched them, but they were unaware of it, intent as they were on the sign. The range sloped down. They were searching south of the Domes, on the border between the flatiron stretch, which widened eastward, and Snow's strip of Square S, which interposed between the farms and the river.

"Watch that posthole there, Larry," said Hachie.

He indicated a deep, round hole in the ground, freshly made. Snow thought it was a peculiar spot for a lone post-hole, but he was busy thinking about the trail. So busy that he nearly died.

Suddenly he heard Ames curse, and Hachie's gray reared and snorted violently. A breath later, Snow ripped at his reins, pulling Tar Baby around, for he heard the stinging whip of bullets in the air.

"Ride like Hades!" he cried.

Hachie did not need a second warning. From a jumble of rocks, covered by a screen of thick brush, emerged a line of horsemen who had just fired on the two. Snow's hasty glance had recognized the gargoyle head of Apache Wurtz, and with Apache was a bunch of heavily armed followers; a dozen anyway. They carried carbines and it was with these that they had attempted to kill Ames and Snow.

The brown gelding they had found riderless couldn't run fast enough, and finally Snow had to let go of the lead reins. Because whenever he fired back at the pursuers with his Colt, the brown would balk and check Tar Baby's gait.

The mounts of both Snow and Ames were superior horses. They began to outdistance Wurtz and his gang, after dropping the brown gelding, but the outlaws kept doggedly after them, hoping for an accident which might stop the flight.

Rounding a low dome, as they were forced southeast, Snow suddenly sighted a large number of men on the flats. There were several teams of heavy work-horses, pulling large metal scoops. Others were breaking the ground out in front, while shovelmen, many of them Mexicans naked to the waist, and in bare feet and big straw hats, were using the earth scooped from the channel to heighten the banks.

"Muller!" Snow sang out to Hachie, pointing, and they swerved toward the scene.

It was Jake Muller's gang, pushing the canal from the farmers' territory to the river. Behind them showed the finished sections of the ditch, cleverly laid out to avoid rises so that gravity might feed the water through.

Apache Wurtz and his bunch, hot on Snow's trail, also sighted the workers. They pulled up, after a final burst of fire, and shook their fists after Snow and Ames.

Jake Muller, bossing the job, turned and stared as the two Square S men rode in.

"Why, howdy, Snow!" he called. "What you doin' over here this time of day? What's all the shootin' about? Who're them hombres back there?"

"That's Apache Wurtz, and some of his bullyboys, shootin' at us, Jake!" Snow shouted back. "They give us a chase."

"Why, that dirty bandit! I heard he had it in for yuh, on Curly's account." Muller swore, leaped over and picked up a double-barreled shotgun which was leaning against a nearby wagon. "I'll give 'em both barrels if they come near enough!"

But Wurtz and his men, seeing that Snow had reached the safety of the crowd, drew off and dropped from sight behind a line of low ridges. For Muller had fifty laborers digging the canal. Many were Mexican, some were Negroes, others tough Irish or German shovelmen.

Snow rolled a smoke, getting his wind.

"We were just goin' to knock off for noon chow," said Muller. "Will yuh have a bite with us, boys?"

"We'll take some coffee, I reckon," Snow said. He and Ames dismounted. They squatted with Muller and a couple of his foremen, and ate from a big iron pot of stew, and drank coffee from tin mugs.

"How's the canal comin', Jake?" inquired Snow.

"We're hittin' right along. Ought to be through to the river inside of another week or ten days—if we don't hit any more rock strata."

IT DIDN'T take long to consume the meal. The men lit quirlies and began to smoke.

"We were on our way to see Varis, Muller," Snow said. "Run into a brown geldin' with blood on the saddle, and were backtrackin' when Wurtz opened up on us."

Muller stared at him. "A brown geldin'? Did he have a white star on his forehead?"

"Yeah, he did."

"Fred Varis was ridin' a hoss like that when he was here this mornin'!" exclaimed Muller. "Yuh reckon somethin's gone wrong with him?"

"We'll have to find out, and pronto. He may be lyin' wounded somewheres not far off."

Snow's vague alarm crystallized into real anxiety as he heard that it might be Varis whose blood stained the saddle on the brown gelding. He thought right away of Joan, how she would feel if her father was hurt, or maybe even dead.

"Wurtz or no Wurtz, we'll pick up that trail agin', " he growled.

"I'll go with yuh." Jake Muller said promptly.

He saddled a chunky white horse and joined Snow and Ames. With three of Muller's armed men, they rode along the canal.

"Them outlaws have sashayed—we're safe enough," remarked Muller. He explained as they rode on, "Varis come out to see how we were doin'. I rode back a way with him, and then he said he'd go on home as he had some work to do, so I got back on the job. It worries me, what yuh say about that brown hoss, Snow."

Around the vicinity of the canal, hundreds of shod hoofs had cut up the earth. There were wagon tracks as well, and the wide, flat marks of swinging scoops. There was too much sign to read details here.

The canal was about four feet in depth and the banks had been built up perhaps a foot higher by the dirt scooped and shoveled from the channel. Older sections were damp from the previous night's downpour, and in some were muddy pools.

After a short run, Jake Muller said:

"This is where we parted. Varis kept on toward camp."

They could see nothing which might be Fred Varis on what portion of the range was visible. To the northeast a plume of smoke marked the site of temporary homes of the farmers.

"Mebbe Varis somehow got home all right," suggested Ames. "Why don't one of us run over there and check up?"

"No use to scare folks," Snow said uneasily. "Best thing is for us to ride west till we cut that brown geldin's trail again."

Apache Wurtz and his gang had gone over the hills by now to their hide-out in the forests, and did not molest them. And patches of woods as well as the contours gave them concealment. Leaving the beaten track, Larry Snow led them across country, skirting rough spots, always hunting the tracks of the gelding which would have taken the easier going.

It was not long until he could raise his eyes and announce:

"Here it is. The brown was still wanderin' at this point, saddle empty."

"There's some more of them fence-post holes," exclaimed Hachie. "Looks like the range is pitted with 'em!"

Jake Muller stared, then he chuckled.

"Them ain't post-holes, cowboy. That's where I took cores. Got a steel tool we push down into the earth a ways to see what we'll hit. It saves time and money, instead of diggin' a whole long ditch and havin' to quit it and start another, savvy? I wanted to run the canal through here but the cores showed we'd run into bedrock for a long ways, so we picked that other route."

"Yuh ought to fill 'em in after yuh find out what yuh want, Jake," advised Snow. "A hoss could break his leg and mebbe his rider's neck if he run into one."

The sign led them nearer and nearer to the road.

"Hey—look!" cried Hachie, who had far-seeing eyes.

They picked up speed, hurrying to the clump of bush he pointed out. A pair of overall-clad legs, ending in muddied shoes stuck out of the brush. The brown gelding's tracks were all about, for here was where he had

tossed off his burden.

Snow, his heart suddenly filled with grief for Joan, helped pull Fred Varis from the bush.

"Cuss it!" growled Muller. "The varmints shot him in the back!"

They could see the gaping wound through the torn, dirtied shirt. It was under the left shoulder-blade, and a good deal of blood had been shed. Varis had been dead for several hours, Snow decided.

HE FELT a cold sickening in the pit of his stomach as, helpless, he stared at the dead man. Up to that moment he had kept hoping, hoping that Varis might only be wounded and could be saved. But strong as he was, and with all his youthful power, there was nothing he could do now.

He kept a steady grip on himself, however. He couldn't show weakness before Muller and the contractor's curious men.

Quickly he cast about, studying the faint hoofmarks around the spot.

"Only the brown gelding's," he remarked as he completed his tour.

"Wurtz and his men must have picked him off from a distance," suggested Muller.

But Snow didn't agree. "No, Jake didn't die here. Lookit this." He held up a piece of lariat he had found nearby. "He was shot somewheres else and tied on his hoss's back. Not too well, either, for the critter finally shook him off. How about two of yore men takin' charge of the body, Muller, and the rest of us go now? We got plenty to tend to."

Calloused hands lifted Varis. He was placed on one of the horses, and Olsen, one of Muller's supervisors, mounted behind to steady the burden.

Snow, his nostrils wide as he rode, picked up the backtrack of Varis's horse again. It led to the road, though the hoofmarks, strangely enough, came from the west. That was the direction of the Square S.

Snow began stroking the bridge of his nose, as he thought it over.

"Funny," he mused. "Looks like Varis was on his way to my place when they got him."

The road was packed, and it had rained the night before. However, Snow was able to follow the sign for another quarter of a mile. Here and there he could identify a fresh hoof imprint, yet he came on some he knew had not been made by the brown gelding Varis had been riding.

"Varis come this way," he said, with decision. "Then his hoss—with Varis mebbe dead and tied to his back—fetched him back a ways, finally cut off the trail and shook the body loose where we found it."

When Snow sighted the dark spots on the light clay way, he motioned the others to keep back so they would not foul up the sign. He dropped his reins and dismounted and, being careful not to overtrack any marks, squatted to study the stains.

"Blood," he thought, "Varis's blood. He fell here."

There were telltale places where the body had lain, and there was road clay on Varis's shirt. From the sign he saw that two horses had stood nearby, one the brown gelding, and the other, he found, had a narrower hoof. Eyes near the prints, he realized that the second animal had worn a cracked shoe on its right rear hoof.

While standing it had jumped and danced, as had the brown—probably, thought Snow, when the shot had been fired. Its rear hoofs had struck in the softer dirt at the south shoulder of the road, and left a clear print. There was a Y-shaped split in the shoe—only a small clue, but something.

When Snow had finished with this he hunted up and down both shoulders for some distance.

"Well?" asked Muller, as Snow rejoined them.

"Varis got this far on the brown gelding," Snow said soberly. "Then another man caught up with him. He wasn't shot from ambush. Him and the other feller talked for a minute or two, then the other feller whipped out a Colt forty-five and shot Varis in the back as he swung around, likely to ride off." Snow's lips were set.

"Then this killer was alone, you figger?" asked Muller.

"Yeah, save for his victim."

"Then it wasn't Apache Wurtz and his gang?"

"If it was Wurtz he was by hisself," declared Snow. "His bunch might have been waitin' for him not far off, of course. Anyways, the killer come on the road as he chased Varis."

"Who's goin' to tell Joan her father's dead?" growled Ames.

"I'll have to do it," said Snow, with a heavy sigh. "We might as well go and get it over with, boys."

As they started off again he rode at the rear, his head down deep in thought. Why had the unknown man killed Fred Varis, who had been a kind, harmless person, and who probably hadn't even been armed? Robbers might have done it, for the belongings Varis had had with him. The dead man's pockets had been rifled. A lone highwayman might have overtaken him, stripped him of his valuables, then shot him to prevent Varis from complaining to the Law.

The only clue Snow had at the moment was that cracked horseshoe, with the peculiar Y-shaped split in it. Sooner or later that horse would go lame. He found himself staring at the imprints of the animals ahead —the mounts Muller and his men rode; even at the prints made by Hachie's horse. None had the Y crack.

"Reckon I'll study every print I see for a long time to come," he mused. His lips tightened. "And some day I'll come across the right one!"

CHAPTER VII

Danger

ALMOST two days had passed since Larry Snow, Jake Muller and the other bearers of the sad tidings had ridden into the settler's camp with Fred Varis' remains.

Snow was still in the camp. He now was sitting on a flat rock near Ulman's tent, smoking. He had been rolling one cigarette after another, for he was uneasy, and could not forget what he had had to do two days before. He knew he had never had a more heart-rending task than when he had had to tell Joan about her father.

A good deal had happened since then. George Ulman, though he had seemed such a retiring sort, had risen to the occasion. He had found hidden strength in his soul and had quietly taken over the guidance of the people who had come to dwell on the flatiron stretch.

Ulman's wife was a smiling, pretty woman, but she was also a capable one. Her plump, rounded body seemed never to tire. She had at once undertaken to care for Joan Varis. Nelly Ulman had two growing boys, but she found room in her heart for the bereaved girl. She had appeared a tower of strength to Snow. He would never forget the way she had put her arms around the stricken girl and led her to a cot, nor the comfort she had been to Joan.

"They're good folks," Snow thought, keenly remembering.

Everybody had tried to help carry Joan's burden. In the crisis which had come with Varis' death, Snow had watched them exhibit the dignity of good people, and characters to match. He had hardly noticed the others in the camp before this. They had been just so many figures to the rancher whose only interest was in Joan, but he had grown to admire and like them all.

Snow had sent Hachie Ames back to the Square S. He was safe enough among the settlers, he told Hachie, and the ranch had to be seen to. Besides, the men there would grow restless and start to hunt them if somebody did not report. Ames had made Snow promise he wouldn't go far from camp alone. Apache Wurtz might be near and ready to pounce any time.

Mrs. Ulman had fed Joan for these two terrible days now, taking her titbits from the community meals served. Snow ate with the crowd.

It was about five P.M., and the sun was taking on a crimson tinge, when George Ulman drove up to the tent camp in a farm wagon. He had been off to the north, doing some work on the section which belonged to him. Sweat stained his clay-soiled shirt and blue overalls, and he got down off the seat slowly. He talked to the heavy farm horses as he cared for them, unhitching them and rubbing them down before turning them out to graze.

Larry Snow went over to him.

"What say, Ulman?" he asked.

Ulman turned his deep-set, brooding eyes on the young rancher.

"He has more patience than I have," thought Snow. He had grown to admire Ulman, and he knew the farmer liked him.

"It's good soil in these parts," said Ulman. "I hate to leave."

"Do yuh think yuh'll go?" asked Snow.

He was sorry. Before he had come to know those people he would have thought it good riddance to have them all leave the vicinity, for ranching and farming didn't mix well.

Now it was different. And there was still Joan.

"Well, I don't know," Ulman said slowly. "We all feel mighty shocked about Varis. Seems dangerous, with these outlaws roamin' the country."

"I ain't seen Jake Muller or any of his teams the last day or so, Ulman," Snow remarked. "Did yuh tell him to quit workin' on the canal?"

"Yes, sir. Yuh see, we wanted to take stock, make shore we'd be stayin' here, before we put up more of our money. So we ordered Muller to hold up till we decided." Ulman was silent for a moment. Then he looked at Larry Snow. "Varis was carryin' eight hundred dollars, belongin' to us all, pay for the work Muller was doin'. It was a blow to lose it—to say nothin' of the killin' of our friend. We'd all come to look up to Fred as our leader.

"If you need money—" began Snow. The more he thought of it, the less he wanted them to go.

Ulman shook his head. "You got yore own troubles, son. We'll handle it somehow."

Both men looked up as a couple of horsemen rode from the brush and came toward the camp. Larry Snow watched them but he didn't recognize either the big, breezy fellow in the blue suit and elegant Stetson, or the lean man with the black mustache who was at his side. They were strangers in the vicinity.

EACH raised a hand, as they approached, and each sang out a loud greeting. Men, women and children in the camp stopped whatever they were doing, to stare as the strangers dismounted. They had friendly, open smiles.

The big man had light hair, sun- and laughter-wrinkled blue eyes, and a florid complexion. His clothing was expensive. He took out a cigar and offered it to Ulman, who had stepped over to greet him.

"Howdy, suh, howdy!" he said expansively. "I was told in Lynxboro I'd find you folks heah. Are you, by chance, George Ulman? I wanted to talk to yuh—an important proposition."

"I'm Ulman," George said simply.

The breezy gentleman's big white teeth gleamed in the sunlight, as he thrust out a large hand to shake with Ulman. His companion, in the background, smiled and nodded. Both men were ultra-friendly.

"I was told at the county clerk's office that you folks own a hunk of land hereabouts," said the big man. "That's why I come to see yuh. I'm glad to say I can make yuh a mighty fair offer on it. Yuh interested in sellin'?"

"We might be," Ulman said cautiously.

Snow wondered who the florid man with the breezy manner could be, but he kept quiet, listening, though he thought, "This flatiron stretch is gettin' all-fired popular lately!"

The big one's name, it turned out, was William Roberts—"Call me Willy!" as he said. The other man was Ben Kent. Words poured from the smiling lips of the talkative Roberts. Ulman signaled his friends, and the men settlers gathered with Roberts and Kent. Larry Snow tagged along. Roberts cast a questioning gaze at him, seeing from his clothing and look he was different from the others.

When it came down to the "mighty fair offer," Roberts said he could pay the same price they had given for the land. Ulman consulted his friends by looking at them, and shrugged. "We've put money in here," was all he said.

"Five dollars more per acre—best I can do," said Roberts.

Snow spoke up, then, though it was not his business.

"If I were you, gents," he drawled, "I'd hold onto the stretch."

Roberts favored him with a quick frown. He blinked as he caught Snow's cold eyes.

"And who," he asked suavely, "is this gent? Does he count here, my friends?"

"That's Larry Snow," replied Ulman. "Owns the Square S. He's a mighty good feller, Roberts."

Roberts' grin was wider than ever. He thrust out his hand, as he stepped to Snow.

"Why, ain't this a coincidence, Larry—yuh heard me say to call me Willy." He seized Snow's hand and pumped the rancher's arm. "I was on my way to see yuh, and stopped off here. I'd like a word with yuh, if yuh could spare the time."

"All right, Willy," Snow said dryly. "Go to it. I got gobs of time."

"Later—it's important," said Roberts, his voice low for a moment.

"Tell yuh what," said Ulman, as he turned back after speaking briefly with his comrades. "We're mighty interested in yore offer, Roberts, and mebbe we'll accept. Give

us twenty-four hours and we'll let yuh know one way or the other."

"Better make it now," said Willy Roberts. "Might have a change of orders by tomorrer."

But Ulman and his associates refused to be stampeded.

Roberts led Snow off a short distance, where they could talk.

"I was on my way to yore spread, Snow," he said. "Meant to spend the night there, if yuh'd put me up. Yuh see, I got a mighty fair offer to make for yore range. Tell me what yuh figger it's worth. Mebbe I can top it."

Despite Roberts' glib tongue and buoyant manner, Snow did not fancy the man. He was too glib, too pushing and, in the rancher's opinion, too familiar.

There was a cold note in his voice as he asked:

"Who yuh workin' for, Willy? Who sent yuh to buy up this flatiron stretch and my ranch?"

Roberts had an answer ready. "A big outfit, one of the largest in Texas. Far as the land goes, it's a drop in the bucket compared to their holdin's, but they're joinin' up two larger sections by takin' in yore spread and this little hunk of sand."

"Yeah? Who are they, this big outfit?"

"I've said all I can," said Roberts, an appeal to Snow's better nature in his ingratiating voice. "You understand. I'm workin' as their agent, and I oughtn't to tell yuh as much as I have, but I'd like to see yuh get a fair-square price. Trust me."

"S'pose I told yuh I wouldn't sell for any price?" Snow said carefully.

"Why not?" Willy Roberts looked surprised. "That's foolish. Make yore profit when yuh can."

"I like it around here. I'm all set. I ain't leavin'. Savvy?" Snow's smile was brittle.

ROBERTS quit smiling, shook his large, handsome head.

"I hate to hear yuh talk like that," he said sadly. "Don't git me wrong, Larry, my boy. It ain't me who would worry yuh. But this outfit I mentioned is tough; and they don't take no for an answer. Why, up in Montana last year, they—" He broke off, shrugged his big shoulders. "'Course I'm just an agent. I don't go in for that sort of thing."

"So they're tough," Snow said. He was getting angry now. "Go back and tell 'em I'm tough, too, Willy. Who taught yuh to lie so good, anyway?"

Roberts bridled, and a lot of the veneer was instantly gone.

"What the devil!" He turned away, but said over his shoulder, "Think it over, Snow. I'll be stayin' at the hotel in Lynxboro for a couple more days."

Larry Snow's lip was curled as he went over to Ulman and said loudly:

"If I was you, gents, I'd tell this hombre no here and now. If yuh need some money to go on with the drainage canal, I'll lend it to yuh or give it to yuh. Or I'll guarantee yore account with the bank. Any way yuh want to do it."

Faces brightened.

"I'm in favor of stayin' here," spoke up Lew Day. "It's a nice spot."

Ned Phillips, and Al Greene nodded agreement.

"Think it over, think it over, boys!" shouted Willy Roberts. He was getting excited, thought the amused Snow.

Roberts would not stay to eat. But, he told them earnestly, he would be in Lynxboro for a day or two, and they could find him there.

Snow watched the two men turn their horses into the brush. Then he said to Ulman:

"I'm goin' to take a ride. Don't worry if I ain't back soon."

"Yore pard said yuh shouldn't go far without a guard," Ulman reminded.

"I'll look in on Jake Muller and tell him to go ahead with the ditch," broke in Snow. "No use losin' any more time."

Snow allowed Roberts and Kent to get only a fair start before he set out on Tar Baby. Soon it would be dark and he wanted to be certain which way they turned on the road.

In the last light of the dying day, he found that the two had headed for Lynxboro on the highway. The country rolled enough so he could lie back and keep out of their range of vision. The wind was soft in his face as he rode, and their dust still hung in the air.

A slice of moon and pale stars grew visible as night fell. Snow picked up a bit on Roberts and Kent. He could hear a shod hoof clack on a stone now and then, or the wind would bring him Roberts' loud voice. He smiled grimly as he plodded on after them.

CHAPTER VIII

Life Is Precious

IT WAS near eleven when Snow and the riders he was following arrived at Lynxboro, where the lights blazed as usual. Roberts and Kent left their horses at Fry's livery barn where they had hired the mounts. Snow, afoot now, and lurking in the shadow of a big live-oak on the plaza, watched them enter the Rope & Irons—Hugo Byers, Prop.

He had to be careful, for Byers had a good many friends and employes in the town as well as strong-arm guards around the saloon.

The Rope & Irons hummed with its usual amusements. Of course, Snow thought, it was the logical place for strangers to stop while in Lynxboro. The Rope & Irons was the largest of the saloons and had more rooms for rent. Everybody went there.

Snow crossed over the street. Roberts and Kent, he noted through the open front door, had paused at the bar for a couple of quick ones. Then they walked to the rear, through an open door. They might be going to their room, but Snow didn't think so. He was justified in that belief when soon he spied the obese Byers waddling through the door after the two strangers.

"Shore would like to hear what they say!" Snow mused.

He managed, without being seen, to reach Tin Can Alley by way of a side passage a little distance up the street. Windows were open in the warm night, and there were air spaces between the Rope & Irons and adjoining, lower buildings. There was a guard at the alley entry.

"There they are!" Snow thought exultantly as he caught sight of his quarry.

Roberts and Kent were in a red-plush parlor near the rear of the place, on the south side of the building. Snow crept as close as he dared, which was near enough for him to hear some of the talk.

"—cussed Snow stopped the whole deal, Hugo." That was Willy Roberts' voice. He couldn't mistake it.

"He won't sell, then—and he's keepin' them nesters from sellin'," said Byers.

"That's it. He called me a liar, too. Seemed to doubt the story we made up so careful 'bout the big outfit."

"I see." Byers was silent, apparently thinking it over. "Snow's a nuisance, a menace, boy," his humbling voice said then. "I hate his insides, too. He's hard to get at, though, mighty wary, and lucky at that. I'll cook his hash for him, pronto. With him out of things the farmers'll give up, without a doubt. Let it ride for a day or two, but hang around. I'll have more work for yuh."

Larry Snow was astonished at what he heard the breezy agent and Hugo Byers saying.

"Why," he thought, "it's only a little while since Byers was glad to unload that stretch on Varis and the rest of the settlers! Now he's willin' to kill to get it back!"

From the big saloon up front, he heard:

Zing-a-ling-a-ling-ling, zing, zang, zou!

Marvene Young was singing the silly song, and feet began pounding on the floor.

Byers was going back to his game up front, and under cover of the uproar caused by the tune, Snow slipped away. Again he saw the armed guard lounging near the back entry to the Rope & Irons, and knew there were many more around, all Byers men.

There were plenty of folks known to Snow in the saloon; people he was sure were decent citizens. Jake Muller and Toffy Drew were two of them who were inside, enjoying the sport.

Marvene finally finished "Zing zang zou." Snow waited, keeping out of the light coming from the saloon. He wanted to speak to Marvene and, knowing her habits, he was ready when she stepped out on the porch and rolled a cigarette to smoke.

"Marvene," he called in a sibilant whisper. "It's Larry!"

She started violently, and her rouged, pretty face turned toward the sound of his voice.

"Stroll over this way, so we can talk," he said, his voice still low.

Quickly she left the veranda, for there were strong-arm men by the open front door. She joined Snow up the way and put a hand on his arm. He felt her trembling.

"Larry! What are you doing in town? You're alone!"

"Just ran in for a look-see, Marvene," he said.

She clung to him. "I wish you weren't such a fool, Larry! I told you it's dangerous for you here. It's worse now, since you slapped Hugo."

Snow had a reason for speaking to the dance hall girl. He meant to ask her to try and find why Byers wanted the Square S, was trying to buy back the flatiron stretch. But before he could make up his mind how to say this, she went on hurriedly:

"Why don't you sell your ranch, Larry? Take what you can get and let's run down to Mexico City! It's a fine place. Some of my friends are down there." She was nervous, her eyes darting about as she spoke.

"Yuh mean—sell out?" he demanded in astonishment.

"Why not? It's not worth your life, is it, that hunk of ground? I'll go along with you, anywhere—even if that Varis girl won't!" A bitter note came into her voice.

HE WAS angry as he drew back, staring at the pale oval of her face as she looked up at him.

"So yuh're workin' for Byers now!" he growled.

"What do you mean?" she begged.

"Hugo told yuh to try and get me to sell out, didn't he?"

She began to cry, but thought better of it. "Yes, he did."

"Why?" His fingers gripped her wrist.

"I don't know. He hates you, wants you out of here, that's all."

Without another word, Snow turned away from the dance hall girl. She did not try to stop him, but watched him cross the street. Then she hurried back to the Rope & Irons.

He was disappointed in Marvene, yet as he cooled off, he knew he was not being entirely fair. Because he knew she was in love with him, meant what she had said about going away with him. And he knew what love was. For he was in love with Joan Varis, and hoped to marry her, if she would have him, when he had disposed of the powerful enemies who had sprung up on his range.

Snow reached the big live-oak on the east edge of the plaza without trouble. The way seemed clear, and he started across to the northwest corner where he had left Tar Baby, with reins on the ground, as he had crept in on the Rope & Irons.

In his ears was the raucous howl of Lynxboro's night life, contributed to in large part by Byers' establishment. His quick eyes checked the fact that his horse was there, head down. But as he came closer Tar Baby heard and scented him and raised his head, giving a gentle whinny.

"Quiet, Tar Baby, quiet!" Snow's soothing hand stroked the velvet muzzle of his pet mustang.

He had bottle-fed Tar Baby from a colt, trained him, cared for him lovingly, and the animal had reciprocated his affection. Tar Baby was excited now. Snow could sense this uneasiness and it communicated itself to him though he did not know what it was about.

"We better get out of town," he muttered, and picked up the reins.

"Reach!"

The command was sharp, insistent. It came from a thick clump of ornamental bushes a short distance behind him, and he could not mistake the distinct cluck-cluck of a cocking piece he thought was a double-barreled shotgun.

Snow might have fought or tried to run for it, but he knew too much about shotguns Loaded with buckshot, they would cover a comparatively large area, spreading as the distance from the muzzle increased. One of the missiles could kill Tar Baby or himself.

He could not see his enemies, either. And that instant of hesitation was enough. Dim rays of light from the city lights gleamed on carbine and shotgun barrels as dark figures jumped up all around him.

Snow still had hold of Tar Baby's lifted reins, as he held up his hands. It would have been certain death to have resisted. He was not sure, even, who had jumped him. But whoever the men were they must have been waiting for him to return to his horse, for he had heard not a sound, nothing to warn him. But Tar Baby had known they were there, had done what he could to tell him of the danger.

It was something of a strain on a man to stand with unknown guns on him, in the dark. Snow found that out.

"Get up behind him and snake his guns—make shore he ain't got any spares hid under his shirt." Snow caught the hoarse order.

As his captors shifted, he thought there must be eight or ten men in the bunch. Strong hands gripped him by both arms, and his Colts were taken from their holsters. He was searched, and they took away his big

clasp-knife, which had a four-inch blade. They did not miss a roll of bills, either, but appropriated it and his gold watch without the slightest hesitation.

"Cup a match and let's see who we got," said the hoarse-voiced man.

A little flame was scratched into being, and in its brief light Larry Snow's face was visible.

Somebody whistled, then chuckled.

"By hook, it's Snow hisself! The boss'll be de-lighted!"

"What's the idea?" demanded Snow, for nothing to be gained by remaining silent. "What yuh want? Who are yuh?"

"Shut up." A stunning blow from a calloused hand made Snow see stars, and his ear rang violently.

It infuriated him. In his blind rage he whirled with a curse to fight. But on the instant they were all over him. His arms were pinned; and one man threw himself at his legs. He went down under the crush of bodies. He got off a couple of muffled cries, then they wrapped his own bandanna over his mouth and tied his hands behind him, wrenching back his arms.

WITH his breath coming in gasps, and dazed, Snow was pulled hastily to his feet. A Colt muzzle was rammed into his spine.

"Amble!" snarled the chief of his captors. The man growled at the others, "Fetch his hoss . . . Where in blazes did it go?"

In the scuffle, Tar Baby, whose reins had been picked up by Snow and laid over the animal's neck, preparatory to mounting, had moved away. That was a little satisfaction to Snow. They would have trouble catching the black. Maybe somebody would recognize Tar Baby and institute a search for his rider.

That was a long point of view, though, and Larry Snow didn't think of it for long. They took him well around the lighted district, down a back street and through a narrow dirt lane which joined Tin Can Alley. In his confusion, Snow thought that they could not be far from the rear of the Rope & Irons as they stopped at a square stable.

The hoarse-voiced leader produced a key and inserted it, to open a padlock on the door. It was dark inside, and smelled musty. There were no animals in there.

"Shut the door," ordered the man.

A match was struck, and a smoke-blackened chimney raised to light a lantern which stood on a soap box. The yellow flame came up and Snow, pushed into a corner, sat with his back to the wooden wall, and viewed the men who had taken him. The bandanna gag had slipped down past his lips but he knew they would shoot him if he cried out.

The windows were boarded over, and cobwebs hung thick in the corners and across the aged ceiling beams. The floor was dry dirt. Old harness straps, and rusting metal equipment lay about.

"So it's you, Dinny!" exclaimed Snow as he recognized one of his captors. "I s'pose these're the new rapscallions Apache and you fetched in!"

Dinny had been a member of Curly Byers' gang. He was a broad, short plugugly, with a sullen face and thick lips. The leader with the hoarse voice was tall, powerful in build, had a reddish tinge to his hair and a lobster complexion. He had more intelligence, evil though it was, than the vegetable like Dinny.

"You'll get yores now, Snowy," snarled Dinny. He had been among the remnants of the smashed band, and had felt Square S lead. He appealed to the tall man, "Let's stick a knife in him, Red! He's had it comin' to him a long time."

"Red," the boss of this contingent of outlaws, no doubt was one of Apache Wurtz' able lieutenants. He had a cooler head than Dinny, and did not share the man's burning hate for Snow, since he had been recruited after the big fight with the Square S.

"Wait'll we're through with him," he warned sharply. He nodded to another of his gang. "Go fetch the chief, Vern."

CHAPTER IX

Fight

RED rolled a quirly, slouched against the wall where he could watch the prisoner and also watch Dinny, who had drawn a long knife and was whetting it on his shoe sole, muttering and swearing at Snow.

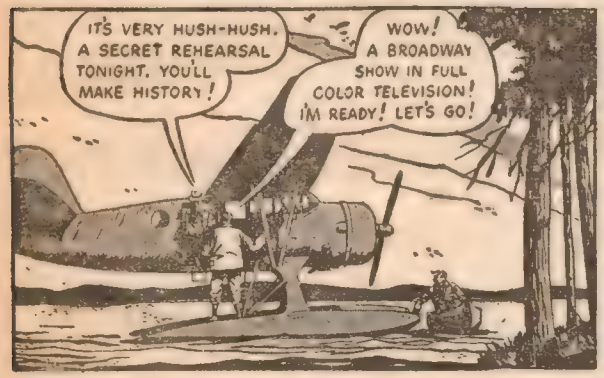
"I'll cut yore insides out, Snowy!" he kept repeating.

Snow maintained a brave front. There was no use in giving

(Turn to page 40)

Bob Got Out Of The Woods In A Hurry When...

IF THAT BLASTED PLANE HADN'T SCARED HIM, I'D HAVE SHOT THAT MOOSE
LOOK... HE'S LANDING ON OUR LAKE. LET'S SEE WHAT'S COOKING!
BOB ALLEN, YOUNG ACTOR, RESTS FROM A LONG RUN ON BROADWAY BY HUNTING UP NORTH


IT'S VERY HUSH-HUSH. A SECRET REHEARSAL TONIGHT. YOU'LL MAKE HISTORY!
WOW! A BROADWAY SHOW IN FULL COLOR TELEVISION! I'M READY! LET'S GO!

I THINK YOU WERE MARVELOUS
JOIN US FOR A LATE SNACK, ALLEN. I'VE GOT GREAT PLANS FOR THIS SHOW... AND YOU'RE IN THEM
SEE WHAT A THIN GILLETTE SHAVE DOES FOR A MAN!

YOU ALWAYS GET REFRESHING, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES WITH THIN GILLETTE BLADES, FOR THESE ARE THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING, LOW-PRICED BLADES YOU EVER USED. AND BECAUSE THEY FIT YOUR RAZOR PRECISELY, THEY PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM THE SMART AND IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES. ALWAYS ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
4 FOR 10¢

them the satisfaction of showing alarm at his situation.

Vern was not gone long. He returned with Apache Wurtz in tow. The lean, angular bandit chieftain was puffing for wind. He had become highly excited when he had heard about Snow, and had dashed out to the stable at once.

His Stetson hung from its chin strap, dangling down almost to his wide cartridge belt, adorned with pearl-handled Colts. His pointed head, with its growth of scrubbing-brush flaxen hair, was in full view, and the scalp was twitching nervously. His loose lips were parted, his small eyes popping, and his right-angle ears seeming to flap forward. He looked more like a gargoyle than ever, thought Snow.

"Why, good evenin', Apache," the rancher drawled.

"Red, yuh got him!" cried Wurtz.

"Not bad, huh, boss?" crowed the hoarse-voiced lieutenant. "When we was follerin' you into town, we spotted a hoss in the plaza brush, and checked up. It was branded a Square S. So we just laid there till Snow come up!"

So that was it! It mortified Snow to realize that it had been chiefly through a stroke of luck on their part that he had been captured. That seemed worse to him then than if they had outsmarted him.

Apache Wurtz stood over Snow. He was gloating, Snow knew. Wurtz had feared him, feared his quick guns and the Square S vengeance. Now he had Snow where he wanted him, and he would even up many old scores.

"Wish pore Curly was here to enjoy this," said Apache. He scowled down at the prisoner.

"Let's give him what he's got comin', Apache," pleaded Dinny, his knife ready as he stepped in on Snow.

"Get back!" Wurtz impatiently shoved Dinny aside. "He's my meat, cuss him. Look!"

Wurtz held up his bare left arm, the arm that had healed wrong. It was a weird-looking member, with the bluish scars and needle marks where it had been sewed up by some clumsy operator who had taken bandit money for the job.

"Aches me like thunderation, specially when it's goin' to rain," complained Wurtz. "I feel it worse now! You done that, Snow. Yuh hit me with a carbine slug that day when you killed Curly!"

Apache's rage boiled over and, with a curse, he drove his spurred boot into Snow's side ribs and began kicking him violently, all the while swearing. He kicked Snow in the body, in the head, for Snow's hands were secured behind him and he could only try to roll with the vicious kicks.

Dinny, smiling with glee, tried to join the sport. He had his knife ready, but Apache did not trust his follower. He turned and pushed Dinny off again.

"Yuh can't kill him yet, yuh locoed fool! Wait'll later and then yuh can go to work and carve him in chunks for the coyotes."

Pain slashed Snow's body, from the kicking. The rowels of Wurtz' spurs brought blood, tearing through his clothing. He was nauseated and retched violently. For seconds he wished Apache would kill him—anything but keep on with the brutal torture.

He would not cry for mercy. He doubted if a shout could have been heard far outside the stable, with the boarded-over windows, with the roar of the nearby Rope & Irons to cover outside sounds. He could hear the music, the low drumming of booted feet on the dance floor.

And if he did yell, these men would only gag him. He preferred to be able to breathe without a gag's impediment.

After what seemed an interminable period, Wurtz, out of wind from exertion, quit kicking him.

"Agh," he exclaimed with satisfaction, looking down at the bruised, bleeding rancher. "Red, stand by him. Kill him if he tries to run—but yuh can shoot Dinny or any other hombre who comes to finish him. There's new orders on this scum, and I'll see to 'em before our personal sport. It's mighty important, savvy?"

"All right, boss."

Red impassively drew a six-shooter and brought the hammer spur back under a long thumb. He took his stand near Snow, his back to the stable wall.

APACHE WURTZ slipped outside, shutting the door after him. It grew quiet inside the stable, as the outlaws settled down, some smoking, some consulting pint flasks of red whisky. Larry Snow's bruised muscles ached, but the desire to live had returned. He thought about Joan, about his fine ranch, and the pleasant life he had planned. Life seemed more precious now.

and he racked his brain for some way out, some way to escape.

But he could see not the slightest chance.

The worst of it, he told himself, was that he had other responsibilities now; not only himself to think about. He had taken on the new settlers as friends, and had intended to see them through.

"Why did I come in alone? . . . Why didn't I hide Tar Baby better?"

But such thoughts were useless, only mental torture added to what he already must bear.

Low voices conferring close outside the stable checked his thoughts of past and future. For an instant his heart leaped with the idea that perhaps they were men who would save him. But the disappointment was sickening, as he caught the colloquy:

"Have him sign it, Apache. If he don't, then dispose of him. Not here, though. Don't want him found nearby."

That was Hugo Byers, giving Wurtz orders, Snow was sure.

Apache Wurtz came in, alone. He carried a bottle of ink and a quill pen which he set down near Snow's right hand. From his pocket he took a legal-looking document and spread it out. Snow could read "Quit-Claim Deed" on the front of it.

Wurtz spread out the paper. With a soiled, stubby forefinger, the nail bitten to the quick, he indicated a freshly marked "X" on a bottom line inside the document.

"Sign it," he ordered.

He dipped the pen in the ink and pushed it into Snow's hand.

"My arm's paralyzed and I can't write, Apache," said Snow. "Yuh kicked the stuffin' out of me."

Wurtz sniffed. "Sign it, pronto, if yuh want to keep on breathin'."

Snow shrugged. He had no illusions. If he could have saved his life by quit-claiming his ranch to whoever wanted it so much—probably Hugo Byers—he would have done it. But Wurtz would never let him go free. A deed signed under compulsion would not hold water, and Byers knew that as well as anybody. So Snow decided he wouldn't make it any easier for them.

Byers had sent Roberts to try and buy in the Square S, along with the flatiron stretch. Now they had come down to this crude method.

"I'll kill yuh and it'll be a pleasure, so help me!" threatened Wurtz, shaking with his hatred for Snow.

He lost his patience and, seizing Snow by the throat, banged the rancher's head against the wall, while Dinny chuckled with delight. But Snow remained adamant, despite the bullying, the pain.

Wurtz again went out, evidently to consult his boss. Snow, his head humming and aching, thought there was more than one man out there with Apache, but he couldn't be certain.

Wurtz came back inside, his ugly face set. "Yore last chance, Snow," he growled. "We can trace yore signature—we got an old bank note yuh signed and it'll be as good as a new one."

"Why not use it, then, Apache?"

Killer glow blazed in Wurtz' eyes. With an exclamation he dashed the ink into Snow's face, and whipped a knife from its sheath. The moment had come, and Larry Snow braced himself for the end.

"S-s-t!"

The sibilant warning came from just outside the closed door of the stable. Someone kicked the wooden panel.

"Watch out—the sheriff's comin'!" That sounded like Hugo Byers.

"Now or never!" thought Larry Snow.

The respite of a moment, but the one chance he had of living, brought a desperate surge of power within him. He summoned all the strength he had left in him, after the beatings, as he acted. His hands were tied behind him but his legs were free and he lashed out at the box which had the lantern on it. He had to make it! If the light didn't go out, he was done for.

The call from without had, for just an instant, taken the eyes of the outlaws off the captive. Heavy stampings sounded in the alley, the rush of hurrying men, and a sharp order in Toffy Drew's voice.

Snow had seized the psychological second. The box went over, the lantern hit dirt and snapped out as the chimney cracked, plunging the stable in darkness.

"Toffy—this way!" Snow bawled. "Watch out for slugs! The stable!"

Wurtz fired at the spot where Snow had been lying. The stabbing flame of the Colt gave a weird illumination for a breath, but Snow was rolling toward a stall.

"Open up there!" roared Toffy Drew.

SOMETHING heavy hit the door, and it crashed in. Trapped like rats, and

cornered, Wurtz and his gang turned their attention on the officers. Drew had brought several men with him, deputies hastily assembled at the alarm.

Red, Dinny, Wurtz and the rest, panic-stricken by the sudden attack, swung their guns and blasted the door. A man screamed and went down across the sill. Toffy Drew and his men were forced to the sides, shooting in at angles at the flashes of their opponents' weapons.

"Red—hustle, smash out that back shutter!" That was Apache Wurtz, gasping his commands.

"They're goin' out the back winder, Drew!" shouted Snow, bunched up in a ball, as small as he could get his body, by the bulge of the stall.

Hasty bullets ripped splinters from the wooden sides of the stall, and dirt flew in his face as they plunged into the floor. But Wurtz and his men were thinking only of escape now. They fled to the back of the stable, and there were sharp thuds as they broke open the wooden shutter.

Toffy Drew was plunging through the door. In the blue-yellow flashes, Snow saw Dinny turn with a snarl. Dinny was in the rear of the outlaw band, his Colt up and firing. The sheriff, with a Frontier Model blazing in his hand, glimpsed him. There was a swift duel, consuming only instants. Drew was hit. He went down on one knee, but he kept shooting, and Dinny pitched forward.

"Get round to the back, Ike!" panted Toffy Drew.

But Apache Wurtz and his men had gone out through the opening, now, and were running every which way. A few scattered shots replaced the violent surge of the battle, and acrid powder smoke drifted from the stable.

Snow hugged the floor, fearing a shot from an outlaw who had not escaped. He could hear the battle continuing outside the stable, but soon it died away. No man was going to run into bullet death in the shadows in the hope of a fleeting glory.

It was a wonder to Snow that not more men had been killed by lead, since the fight had been at such close quarters. But gun hands had been rattled and escape uppermost in all minds.

"It's all over, boys," Snow called. "Better make a light."

"Who is that yapping?" somebody asked.

CHAPTER X

On the Dodge

ONE of Drew's deputies struck a match and lit a bull's-eye lantern. Others who had come with Toffy were chasing Wurtz and his men. Blood stained Drew's chest, but it was running from his arm, down his shirt. He was shocked but, gritting his teeth, he was pulling himself together as he rested.

Larry Snow jumped up from the floor, his hands still fastened behind him.

"Toffy—it's me, Snow!" he shouted.

"There yuh are, Larry!" Drew's breath was fast. He tried to grin at the rancher. "We—come for you, boy."

"Cut my hands loose, will yuh?" said Snow.

Drew laid his pistol down on the floor, carefully and drew a sheath knife with his right hand. He sawed at the thongs, then Snow was free.

"Toffy!" a deputy rushed in to report. "They're mountin' across the plaza and headin' for the chaparral!"

Drew swore. "We'll get after 'em! Fetch me my hoss, Ben."

"Byers is in on this, Sheriff," declared Larry Snow. "He sicked Wurtz on me. He was here, too, just before you attacked. I'm —I reckon they done me in."

Now that it was over, he felt as limp as a rag. The kickings and beatings had exhausted him.

"Go on over and wait at the jail," ordered Drew. "I'm goin' to try and take Wurtz."

He got up, bracing himself against the stable wall, and then Ben brought up his saddled mustang. Drew went out and got into the saddle.

"I'll go with yuh!" Snow said swiftly.

"Pick up a hoss, then." Drew was rushed, excited as he rode off, with his handful of deputies.

Snow moved away quickly. But he got no opportunity to pick up a horse and follow. He could see the fat figure of Hugo Byers, and a number of the saloon keeper's strong-arm men against the light from the building. They were staring at the stable, and as Drew

and his men left, they surged toward the spot.

Larry Snow had no gun, and he was weakened. He knew that he would be no safer with Byers and his crowd than he had been with Wurtz.

"Oh, Larry! Larry!"

That was a woman calling. A shrill, desperate note in her voice. Marvene Young! Snow did not reply, for he believed she was working for Hugo Byers in his schemes as well as singing in his saloon.

In the dark shadows he crawled off, keeping out of the open paths and lanes. For a time he hid in a woodshed, only a few hundred yards from the back door of the Rope & Irons. He was aware that parties of men passed and repassed, probably hunting him at Byers' order. And there was no one to whom he could look for aid now, since Toffy Drew had dashed off in pursuit of Apache Wurtz.

Snow's throat felt as dry as an old rag. At a well, he drew a bucket of water and had a drink. He also washed the grime and blood from his face. Not that he meant to show himself around Lynxboro, with Byers looking for him feverishly. He was too dangerous a witness for Byers to let live, and Byers and his gang wanted him out of the way so they could seize the Square S.

After an hour, the town quieted down. Snow rested, but forced himself to stay awake, though he was so sleepy he could scarcely hold his eyes open. There was a light in Drew's jail but he knew the sheriff hadn't yet returned, and twice he saw dark-clad figures cross the patch of the doorway.

Byers' men of course. The town seemed full of them, and all of them hunting for him.

He tried to judge the situation coolly. Toffy Drew was his friend. That was a comfort—to have the Law on his side. Drew could eventually provide strength for him to confront Byers and Wurtz, but they had to catch their enemies in the right spot—a difficult task. He had Hachie Ames and his own handful of cowboys, who would fight to the end for him.

Ulman and the settlers would be doubtful allies in a gun battle. They were farmers, not gunfighters. But they would give him moral support and what aid they could, and he believed them to be safe enough for the moment, since Byers considered Snow the chief stumbling-block to the outlaw plans. As soon as he could, though, he would have to provide protection for the settlers.

"Byers is after the Square S, and the flat-iron stretch," he thought. "Prob'ly figgers on a bangup real estate development that'll fetch in a fortune!"

Perhaps the digging of that irrigation canal had shown Hogshead Hugo Byers the high value of such land. The eagerness of Fred Varis, George Ulman and the other settlers to buy may have whetted Byers' sensitive financial appetite.

SNOW'S head ached, and his limbs were as stiff as boards. Sleep made him stumble, his eyes kept closing of their own accord.

He didn't fancy sleeping in Lynxboro, though not with Toffy Drew out, and with Byers aware that he was somewhere near. Hogshead Hugo would be terribly upset and duly alarmed over Snow's escape. For the saloon man must know that Snow would bring the Law down on him as sure as the sun came up every morning.

Gradually Snow had worked to the darker north end of the town. The street lamps in the center of Lynxboro and the lights from the Rope & Irons and other saloons gave enough glow so he could occasionally see armed men crisscrossing the streets, hunting in holes and behind buildings. They were watching the sheriff's office, all the while.

He lay alongside a wood-box at the side of a darkened residence. He saw horses not too far away, at the hitch-racks, which gave him hope. Then he saw an equine shape over the plaza, and his heart leaped. It looked like Tar Baby. But his mount had broken away from Apache Wurtz long ago. No, it wasn't so long, though it seemed ages to Larry Snow now.

Snow came up on his knees. He essayed, a couple of whistles, and hoped the beautiful black gelding would hear.

A man in a black suit, carrying a sawed-off shotgun, heard him, and turned his way. One of Byers' aids!

Snow crouched back, holding his breath. He had no weapon, and Byers' man who had heard him whistle had swung in his direction, and was coming to see what went on. The rancher crawled toward the rear of the little house.

The drum of hoofs made him look back over his shoulder. It was Tar Baby! The keen-eared animal had recognized his usual call.

"Hey, there—what's up?" called the shotgun man.

Tar Baby cantered on past him, down the space between the two shacks.

"Tar Baby!" whispered Snow. "Here, boy!"

The black nuzzled his arm. Snow pulled himself into the saddle, and jerked his right rein.

"Halt, you, whoever yuh be!" bawled the shotgun man.

Snow, lying over Tar Baby's withers, had only a few feet to go to reach the protection of the adjoining building. The shotgun blared, but too late. The scattering buck only cut the air, and Snow galloped away, for the out road.

He was so worn, still suffering from his hurts, that he was scarcely able to cling to the gelding's back. Home was too far off to reach, and right now he wanted only to sleep. Snow knew the country like a book. He recognized where he was when he glimpsed a yellow light, like a beacon, on a height a few miles off. "Jake Muller's!" he muttered. "Mebbe I'll go there, and ask Jake for a bunk, for help. . . ." The contractor was strong enough to offer protection and aid.

But sleep was too insistent for Snow even to go the necessary distance to reach Muller ranch.

"I'll see Jake in the mornin'," he decided.

He had his poncho, and it was not cold. He entered the brush, dismounted, and unsaddled Tar Baby. Head on leather, the poncho over him, Larry Snow slept. . . .

The sun which awoke him made his bivouac hot, stuffy, beating down on the greenish, dusty leaves. He was so stiff he had to test his elbows, his knee joints to see if they were workable, grunting as he did. Bruises, cuts, swellings covered his body, and his clothing was a mess. His whole body hurt from the vicious kicking Apache Wurtz had given him.

He consulted the sun, decided it was between ten-thirty and eleven. He had slept right through all those hours. Now he was faint from hunger, and needed water.

Jake Muller's was the nearest haven. It stood on a low hill to the northwest of Lynxboro and was still in sight. Saddling up, and drawing the cinches tight enough, Snow mounted and started that way. He wanted to speak to Muller, and he could get food, drink, a spare gun from the contractor.

He was only a half-mile from the turn-in to Muller's when the approach of a band of horsemen sent him scurrying into the brush and rocks. The riders might be his foes, looking for him. Then he recognized a familiar voice. It was Hachie Ames. Hachie and eight of the Square S were headed for Lynxboro.

"Hachie!" he sang out hoarsely.

Ames heard him, and the men rode on to meet him as he led Tar Baby out to the road again.

"Gee, Larry!" cried Ames. "What've yuh done to yore face!"

Snow grinned, his heart warming at sight of his boys—"Arizona" Kegg, "Shorty," "Mex," Frankie Ince and the rest. His loyal followers—the Square S. He sparked them but they formed the heart and soul of the ranch.

"Am I glad to see yuh, boys!" he cried. "Had quite a set-to in town last night!"

HACHIE AMES cursed him fluently, with deep irritation, but Snow knew it came from his close companion's affection for him and he did not mind.

"Yuh wasn't s'posed to leave that settlers' camp, Larry," growled Ames.

"I had to. Couple of smooth operators come along and tried to buy in the flatiron stretch, and the Square S, Hachie. I trailed 'em to Hugo Byers. I figger he's decided he'll get his paws on the whole shebang, and make a whoppin' real estate development of it. At the same time, he'll be rid of me, and that'll make him kingpin in these parts. But how come yuh started lookin' for me so quick?"

"Keggie met one of Toffy Drew's deputies crossin' our range," explained Hachie. "He told Keggie about the scrap last night, and how they were huntin' Wurtz and all. I made up a party pronto and we come a-runnin'."

"Lucky I met yuh. Lynxboro ain't safe for the Square S."

"Huh! Sorry yuh didn't figger it thataway last night!"

"Well, I learnt a lot," said Snow, taking back his rightful authority as chief of the Square S.

They had canteens of water, some iron rations, and a Colt and belt for him. Snow rode beside Ames, and they headed for Muller's.

Up the slope, Muller's squat frame house, needing paint, occupied a dominant position. He had a good well, and barns, corrals and sheds, but he was a contractor rather than

a rancher. There was a blacksmith shop for shaping iron, for shoeing horses—the work animals Muller used in his jobs.

Heavy geldings and mares grazed in fenced pastures. Smoke issued from the forage chimney, while scoops, and ploughs, other machines used by Muller in his work littered the yard.

"Here comes the Square S!" sang out a man in the door of the cookshed as the riders approached.

Jake Muller hastily emerged from a stable, and stood there as Snow rode up. Muller's light-blue eyes were fixed on Snow's countenance. The broad, thick-bodied contractor wore corduroy pants and a stained shirt. His round head was bare.

"Hi, there, Jake!" cried Snow, waving a friendly greeting.

"What's up?" called Muller—several of his hired men were hurrying toward him. "So it's you, Snow! Yuh bump into a tree or was yuh kicked?"

"Worse'n that, Jake," Snow told him cheerfully. "Apache Wurtz done a job on me last night in town. I had a close squeak of it. I come to talk to yuh. Thought yuh might give me a hand if yuh had time."

"What can I do for yuh?"

"It's like this, in a nutshell: Hogshead Byers is sore at me over Curly. You savvy that. Apache Wurtz and Byers are in cahoots. They're determined to wipe me out, take the Square S and the flatiron stretch—for a real estate development I 'spose. Byers done right well sellin' to Varis and his friends. When the time comes, mebbe yuh'll be willin' to lend a hand cleanin' up them outlaws."

Muller was amazed. He swore, and blinked. "Hugo Byers is workin' with Wurtz, yuh say? Yuh shore, Snow?"

"I got the proof. I aim to knock the pins out from under 'em, though. Yuh don't have to come in unless yuh want to, Jake."

"I will—glad to," Muller said promptly. When yuh want us? Just say the word. How yuh plan to fix Byers and that bandit bunch?"

"Mighty white of yuh, Jake," said Snow. "Tell yuh what. Soon as I'm set and ready, I'll send for yuh. You fetch as many fighters as yuh can."

"Right. 'Course, you savvy I ain' got too many men here a lot of the time. I hire them gangs of Mexicans and all to dig by the day, and I let 'em go when I don't need 'em. They fight fine with their tongues and fists, but they ain't much account with guns."

"Well, every little bit'll help," said Snow. "Let yuh know soon as I'm organized, Jake. But that ain't the main reason I come to call. I wanted to ask yuh to keep on with that irrigation canal for Ulman and the rest of 'em. I'll guarantee the expenses."

"Bueno," Muller said heartily. "Yore word's good as cash, Larry. They ordered me to lay off the other day, after Varis was killed—said they wasn't shore they'd stay."

"They will, I think," Snow said confidently. "Once we've fixed Byers and Wurtz."

CHAPTER XI

Poisoned Cows

MULLER had the cook heat coffee and serve a meal, and the warm food went well with Larry Snow. The Square S left the contractor's ranch then and hit the road.

It was hot, too hot to suit any of them.

"It's goin 'to rain like all get-out," declared Hachie Ames."

The others agreed, Keggie remarking that they could use it.

Snow dozed in his saddle. He was trying to shape his plans to strike back at Hugo Byers and Wurtz, but it was hard to think clearly when he was so weary. He meant to stop at the farmer's camp before going to the Square S. He must warn them about Byers and Wurtz. He was worried about what might happen to his new friends, to Joan.

Thunder was growling in the distance, and the sky was hazy. Black clouds edged over the western hills, and forked lightning split the sky again and again as the thunder rumbled ominously.

Larry Snow jogged awake, as Tar Baby shied—and caught himself in the midst of a thought sent up by his subconscious mind.

"I might get help from Colonel Burns," was the thought. "He'd send all the men he had on hand!"

Burns was owner of the Lazy B, southeast of Lynxboro and outside the railroad city of Coffeetown. It was a long run, however. Rough country cut off Snow's range on

the west and north, and that was either too rocky or too arid for ranching. Snow had liked it for that reason, for he had been kingpin in his district. Now he rather wished he had some cattlemen neighbors close enough for him to bring them in fast.

The sun was blotted out. Dark clouds, heavy with rain darkened the world. The lightning was closer, much closer, and the thunder was mighty, shaking the earth with its voice. Such storms were unusual so late in the spring, for there was little rain during the summers.

The mustangs shivered uneasily, rolling their eyes as the vibrant peals shook the earth. Big drops spattered the riders who knew they must do something to escape the downpour. Hunting some sort of safe shelter, they found a bluff, on higher ground, which had an overhanging lip of stone. They crowded in beneath it, holding the reins of their mustangs, and prepared to sit out the storm.

They were no sooner sheltered than the rain came down in sheets, blinding, driving with crazy fury before the cooling wind. A lot of water fell. Rivulets ran off the stone lip, and splashed the backs of the horses. The boots of the Square S men were wet and muddy and they were all damp and uncomfortable. But Snow, sitting on a flat rock with his back to the cliff, fell asleep. . . .

The voice that wakened him sounded far away, as if from another world.

"Come on, Larry! Hate to wake yuh, but the storm's over and we better move."

Snow opened his eyes and sat up. The short nap had refreshed him. He rolled a quirly, and shook the sleep from his eyes. His mind was clearer now and he swiftly became alert.

They cut across country, skirting woods and patches of rock. The earth was soggy in spots with the run-offs from the storm, and pools of rainwater had collected here and there. The plants looked refreshed, though, and more alive.

After a fast run they came to the tongue of land which cut the flatiron stretch off from the river. This was Square S territory, belonging to Snow, and not far to the west lay the unfinished ditch which Muller had been digging.

"Look at them cows!" called Arizona Kegg, who was riding off to one side.

As they all rode up past the rise, they saw the Square S animals moving slowly, bunched together, their hides glistening from the washing the rain had given them.

"Storm drove 'em over, I reckon," remarked Hachie Ames.

When the cattle saw the riders they stopped and slowly began to turn back toward the river.

"We'll foller the ditch up to the camp, boys," said Larry Snow.

"What's that over there?" asked Hachie, after they had sighted the rain-beaten dikes of the canal and were swinging north to reach the settler's camp.

"Couple cows down!" exclaimed Shorty.

They rode over. Two big steers lay on the earth, tongues protruding, eyes bulging. They were heaving, dying. Green foam was on their muzzles. Snow and Hachie despatched the suffering creatures with well-placed revolver shots to the brain.

Snow's face burned with anger as he straightened up.

"P'isoned, Hachie! Arsenic, I reckon. Who'd put it around here?"

"There's another one across the ditch, boss!" called Kegg.

SNOW rode to the canal. The run-off water had collected in it several inches deep. It was greenish in hue. These cows evidently had been drinking from the ditch. Furious, Snow crossed over, and checked up. The third steer was already dead, poisoned like the others.

"Stuff's planted all through here!" he growled. "We better run that bunch to the river, boys, before they all get it."

They swung to chase the large bunch of Square S cows from the vicinity of the ditch, starting them running south.

"Whoever done this ought to be skinned alive!" snarled Ames. "Why, s'pose we took a drink—we'd die the same way, and our hosses! Wonder how much is planted, Larry?"

Snow shrugged. "This is the last straw. I'll bet Byers done it, Hachie. I'll prove it agin him, too!"

"How?"

"This water can be analyzed. There's a Government chemist over at Coffeetown, where you're goin'."

"Me, goin' to Coffeetown?"

"That's right. Yuh might as well start right away, soon as I collect samples of the poison. We can put some of that green water in a canteen—but be careful not to drink

it on the way!"

"It's a long run," objected Hachie. "I hate to leave yuh, Larry. Can't yuh send Kegg or another man?"

"This is too important." Snow shook his head. "The proof the range has been poisoned is one more link agin Byers, Hachie. But the main reason I want yuh to go is to ask Colonel Burns of the Lazy B for help. Burns'll loan me twenty-five or thirty good fightin' men, if he has 'em on hand. I want cowboys who savvy what it's all about. And we'll hold an ace card by runnin' in 'em secret-like so's to catch Byers and Wurtz by surprise. Toffy Drew's watched in the town, and there ain't too many deputies available there. Byers has the town hogtied."

Hachie frowned. "Well, I reckon yuh're right, Larry—only that little word 'if' sometimes proves the diff between life and death. Burns'll lend yuh men 'if' he has 'em on hand! S'pose they're spread out across the range. Ain't many ranches got such a crew loungin' around, honin' for a scrap. Besides, it'll take me a whole day to reach the Lazy B, then whatever time's needed to collect the boys, and another day to fetch 'em here on back roads or cross country. That gives Byers and Wurtz plenty of chance if they hit us pronto."

"Got to take our chances," Snow said grimly. "Tell yuh what. Instead of runnin' the Lazy B all the way to our place, collect at Jake Muller's. I'll be watchin' for yuh. It'll save time."

Snow filled a canteen with greenish fluid from the ditch. While doing this he noticed a washed-out section where the downpour had broken the crust and carried away a section of bank. There was a patch of greenish, gravel-like stuff there; actual chunks.

"Here's some of the poison itself, I believe!" he exclaimed. "It'll be better'n the water."

He scooped some up and wrapped it carefully, giving the canteen and sample to Ames who was preparing for the run to Coffeetown.

As he watched Hachie ride off, Snow mused, "Have to hold out and fight 'em off till he's back!"

The rest of the Square S started along the canal toward the settlers' camp. The Domes rose about them soon. Snow, in the van, saw a rider hardly two hundred yards off and pulled up, ready for anything. But it was Toffy Drew, with one arm in a sling, who drooped wearily over his mud-splashed horse.

"Hi, Toffy!"

Larry Snow spurted up to greet his sheriff friend. Drew checked his mount, a hand dropping to his six-shooter, but then he saw who it was, and waited.

"Hullo, boy!" he called. "You all right?"

Drew was worn to a frazzle, from his long hours in the saddle, and from loss of blood, for his arm wound had kept breaking open. The rain had caught him in the open and drenched him. He was not alone, though, for a couple of weary deputies were approaching along the winding area between two of the Domes.

"I'm all right, Toffy," Snow said, "but I reckon we both need some sleep."

Toffy Drew cursed spiritlessly. He took a plug of black tobacco from his pocket, bit off a chunk.

"We downed one of them lobos, Larry," he said, "but Apache got clear. Chased 'em some, after they split up. Yeah, I got to have some shut-eye. I was makin' for that farmers' camp. It ain't far now, is it?"

[*Turn page*]

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"Nope. Just over the next hill."

"Let's go there then. We can get some coffee and chow, I hope. . . . Say, I noticed a couple of bloated cows, yore animals, lyin' back a ways. Looked like they'd been poisoned."

"They were," Snow said angrily. "Byers—I reckon it was him—has had it spread around. That's what I figger. Arsenic, looks like."

"Ugh. Hogshead is in for it. I'm goin' to arrest him when I get back to Lynxboro, Larry. S'pose we can make the charges stick? I'd hate to see the sidewinder wriggle out or jump bail and escape! We need strong proof to hold him right."

"I'll swear against him. Mebbe we can trace the poison to him."

TOFFEY DREW shrugged, his leathery cheek bulged by his cud of tobacco. In a knock-down, drag-out gun battle you couldn't find a better man, thought Snow. Toffy was smart enough, too, on the average, but against such an organization as that which Hugo Byers ran, Drew had difficulty; any such officer would. When such criminals were hailed into court, lawmen were at a disadvantage, since men like Byers would make use of perjurers, lying witnesses, and their wealth would buy glib-tongued lawyers who could make black look white.

Drew's men were strung out for a half-mile behind him, as the two parties rode toward the tent camp of the settlers.

The sun was out, now, hot and yellow. The air was not so oppressive, since the storm had cleared it. The land was quickly drying under the afternoon rays.

Joan Varis saw Snow coming as she was standing near Ulman's tent. She waved, and hurried to meet him.

"Larry!" she exclaimed. "What's wrong? Are you all right?"

She had been deeply worried about him. Hachie Ames and the Square S had come to the camp, on their way to Lynxboro, so she had learned that Snow had been in trouble.

George Ulman, Lew Day, Al Greene, Phillips, and the other farmers came to greet Snow. The women and children stared at the bedraggled cowboys and possemen.

"Fetch some clean cloths and hot water, Nelly," ordered Ulman, as he took in their state. "Girls, heat up that stew left over and make some fresh coffee. Let's have some of that fresh bread yuh made, too, Nelly."

CHAPTER XII

Empty Trap

JOAN pitched in to help feed and care for the riders who had come to the camp so weary and famished. Larry Snow felt the deepest sense of happiness, of peace, just watching her. She was capable, as well as beautiful. Now and then she turned and smiled at him as she worked at preparing the meal.

He ate heartily. He had had something at Muller's but he couldn't seem to fill up. When he had finished this time, he relaxed. He tried to smoke, but his eyes wouldn't stay open. Toffy Drew was already snoring, stretched out in the shade of a tent fly, on a horse blanket. His wound had been washed and dressed by Nelly Ulman.

"Got—to sleep, Joan!" murmured Snow.

Her smile was the last he remembered as his eyes closed. . . .

When he awoke, the sun was gone.

Night fell soon. Toffy Drew was awake, and asking for more coffee. Snow also had some, and ate again when Joan pressed a plate of food on him. He felt much more like himself. The feverish state had left him. He was stiff and sore when he moved, but the sleep had done much to restore his youthful power and vigor.

Drew was older, less resilient. He grunted as he moved, trying to get the kinks out of his system. He called Snow over.

"Here's what we'll do, Larry. I'm goin' to swear you in as my chief deputy, savvy? That'll give yuh the legal power to swear in others. We'll take in yore boys, and we'll head for town and go after Hugo Byers. I'm goin' to toss him in jail tonight."

"Bueno," said Snow. "But we better go in careful, Toffy. Byers has a lot of gunnies workin' for him."

"Yeah, we'll make it a surprise hit. Let's ride."

Larry Snow went over to saddle Tar Baby. The mount also was rested, had grazed and been watered. And the black gelding had

been rubbed down and cared for, before Snow had thought of himself.

Snow lifted the leather, placing it gently in position on Tar Baby's back. He stooped and slipped the straps through the buckles, tightening the cinches. When he straightened up, he heard Joan's voice:

"Larry!"

She had followed him, and stood watching as he saddled up.

Snow dropped the reins, so Tar Baby would stand quiet, and smiled at the girl in the dim light from the still glowing cookfire. The wall of a tent hid them from the people in the camp.

She held out her hand to him and Snow seized it, a thrill in his heart. He felt as if she were looking up to him, leaning on his strength.

"Joan! You're mighty beautiful!" His voice was husky.

The next moment she was in his arms. He kissed her, held her, his head swimming with happiness.

"I'm afraid, Larry," she whispered then. "Don't go to that town. They—they'll kill you."

"I've got to go, honey, got to," he told her. "It's my fight."

"Do you have to fight?" she asked tremulously.

He was troubled as he held her in his arms, looking down into her face.

"Yes, a man has to fight, Joan," he said soberly. "What would yuh think of me if I lay down and let 'em trample on me?"

For a while she was silent. Then she said, resignedly:

"I guess you're right. But take care, won't you?"

He was kissing her again when he heard Toffy Drew calling him.

"Come on, Snow! Let's go."

"I'll be back as soon as I can, Joan," Snow promised her in farewell.

The Square S and Drew's posse made up a respectable fighting force; they were somewhat revived from their short rest after the long riding, and were filled with sustaining food. They saved their breath and did little talking as they hit the road for Lynxboro, riding on as the moon came up, bathing the range in silver light.

It was near midnight when they sighted the town lights, and Drew and Snow conferred and decided on the plan of approach. Snow led his Square S men off the road, to the east of the settlement, while the sheriff took his posse and lined out on the west. They would ride in when they came opposite the center of town, and sweep up what they could.

Snow spread his men out in a thin line, and made the swing toward the town. He led the way, gun in hand, watching for opposition.

THE first shacks he reached were dark, and he went on toward the big, still-lighted Rope & Irons, Hugo Byers' headquarters. He was listening for sounds of trouble from the plaza, for by this time Toffy Drew would be pushing in from the western approach.

But the settlement was quiet. There was little noise, from the saloons even; only music and a few voices.

Snow dismounted, guns ready—a six-shooter in each hand. With his men he crossed Tin Can Alley, and moved on the rear of the Rope & Irons. But strangely enough there was no guard on duty, and Snow entered the lighted hallway without a shot being fired.

Byers had living quarters in the building—on the ground floor, to the rear. Snow tried the door. It opened, and he peeked in at the empty parlor. A lamp, turned low, on the table, and he could see the bed in the adjoining room. Hugo Byers wasn't in either room.

The hall and side rooms did not offer any trouble, either. Snow saw a few men playing cards, but they were not members of Byers' bunch.

Then, with his cowboys behind him, Larry Snow made his entry into the main saloon and stood looking quickly around for enemies. There were some dancers in the annex, and the gaming tables were going. The piano player was playing a waltz. Bartenders were serving late customers.

At a table near the door, sat Jake Muller, the contractor, and a couple of friends. But Hogshead Byers and his strong-arm men were not in sight.

"Hey, Toffy!" called Snow.

The sheriff appeared in the front door, trailed by several possemen.

Drew waved at Larry Snow. Then all of them entered the big room, still wary, but there were no shots fired, nothing to work on.

"Where's Hugo?" Drew demanded of a white-aproned bartender.

"Ain't seen him all evenin', sheriff. I think he rode out of town before dinner time."

Jake Muller got up and came to join the invaders as they spread along the bar. Drew and Snow sent a couple of men outside to keep guard.

"Hullo, boys!" Muller said as he reached the bar. "Heard yuh askin' for Byers. I ain't seen him at all. I think he's sashayed. Anything I can do, Larry?"

"Tell yuh later, Jake," said Snow. "Wait'll we can have a pow-wow."

He missed something else in the place.

"Where's Marvene?" he inquired.

"She left town with Hugo," answered the barkeeper.

They all had a drink, then Toffy Drew nodded to Snow and they went outside.

"Byers has run for it, Toffy," Snow said. "Reckon he got worried when I escaped, after they tried to force me to sign over my ranch. And Marvene's gone with him!"

Snow felt hurt about Marvene and her recent actions. He had been fond of the dance hall girl. He had thought she was his friend, yet she had tried to get him to surrender the Square S to Byers. She had explained that by saying it was because she didn't want to see him, Snow hurt. He had believed it, for he knew women couldn't stand to see men they cared about in danger. Now he was disillusioned about Marvene.

"Come here a sec, Larry," ordered Drew. He drew the rancher aside. "Look here. If Marvene went with Byers, I'm afraid it was unwillin'ly."

"How so? She works for Hugo, after all."

"Yeah, but she's for you. I promised her not to tell, but the reason I come to the stable and saved yore hide was that Marvene told me they had you in there. Otherwise Wurtz would've sliced yuh into chunks, Larry."

Snow felt ashamed of his suspicions. "I'm a fool, I reckon, Toffy. But if what yuh think is right we got to locate Hugo, and save Marvene if possible. Byers must have found out she told me, and he won't forgive her easy."

The rancher felt a deep uneasiness. Lynxboro was too quiet. He was restless, wanted action, for he knew there were powerful enemies lurking somewhere in the night.

"S'pose yuh swear me in, Toffy," he suggested. "We'll organize and get ready. Hugo Byers and Apache Wurtz ain't goin' to give up this simple."

"All right. Come on over to the jail and I'll make yuh my chief deputy."

"Wait'll I pick up Tar Baby, then I'll be right with yuh."

"Right. I'll go on over and light up, Larry."

Snow and his men trooped back to Tin Can Alley, where they had left their horses, mounted and rode through a lane to reach the plaza. As Snow cut toward the jail, seeing the light in the windows, the whole world seemed rocked by an explosion. Before his shocked, horrified eyes, the solid little building rose in brilliant yellow flame, disintegrating in the air.

DEAFENED, the blast nearly unseating him, and with Tar Baby squealing and rearing beneath him, it was moments before Snow realized what had occurred. Then he knew! The jail had been mined and blown to smithereens by dynamite planted inside.

"Toffy—Toffy!" he screamed.

Smoke and dust clouds obscured the scene and bits of adobe brick and boards still rained down. A fire had started, but Snow forced Tar Baby toward the smashed building.

People were running from the saloons, and lights sprang up in darkened homes, as citizens, roused from sleep, sought to discover what had happened.

The jail was a heap of rubble. A big hole had been blown in the ground where it had stood. Dismounting, Snow began to search. He could feel the heat from the burning pile of wood and rubble, but ignored it.

There was no sign of Drew. Evidently the sheriff had been blown to shreds. Kegg picked up the lawman's badge, with a patch of cloth attached to it. Another man found the officer's hat.

Gunshots suddenly roared. Larry Snow heard lead whistling as he leaped to his horse. Dark riders came charging at the Square S from the rims of the settlement. The blast had been a signal. They had found an empty trap, but it had been baited—baited for Toffy Drew and the Square S.

"Square S—foller me!"

There was a stentorian quality in Larry Snow's voice, trained to hurl commands in the teeth of storms which swept down from the plains across vast Texas. But there was a desperate shrill to it as he instantly gaged

the situation and sought to pull his handful of cowboys from the awful death trap.

He was firing at the charging riders, trying to gain a few breaths of time for his men. The blast had stunned their senses, just as it had Snow's.

Blasting guns, howls of wolfish killers, the confused babble from spectators too far removed from the struggle both physically and mentally to count at the moment, filled Lynxboro. He couldn't make out features yet, but Snow had instantly concluded the attackers were Byers' men, abetted by Wurtz's gang. His Colt flamed point-blank at their lines.

His men had been revitalized by his sharp command. Already they were following him as he chose the south route, which seemed clearest. The enemy strategy seemed to be to catch them between two spread-out lines, the ends coming in fast so as to enfold everybody on the plaza in the pincers!

CHAPTER XIII

Desperate

LARRY SNOW kept as cool as he could manage, as he skillfully shot from the saddle. His bullet got a mustang, and the rider went head over heels. He cut a second man with a slug, and forced him to veer from his guns. Now the Square S boys, close at Tar Baby's heels, were galloping out of the closing trap, their Colts snarling.

Trees on the plaza, then the bulk of houses, helped them as they burst through the thin line at the south end of Lynxboro. In a fairly compact bunch, the Square S and some of Sheriff Drew's deputies swept along the continuation of Central Avenue below the commons, and turned toward the wooden bridge across the river.

Howling foes came after them. But not one of them could ride like Larry Snow and his men. Hogshead Hugo Byers had mounted a number of his bouncers and hangers-on who were not riders at all. Apache Wurtz's outlaws, of course, were excellent horsemen, but even as the Square S flashed across the bridge, with the hoofs drumming the loose planks and making the bridge vibrate crazily, the enemy was strung out.

Long shots under the moon sought the Square S. The men could hear the whistle of lead. They fired back for a time, but Snow's chief idea was to save the lives of his boys, get out of there.

On the brown dirt road they sped recklessly on, always gaining yards, just making time. Tar Baby's powerful body was vibrant under the skillful handling, the soothing words Snow used to coax speed from the mount's long legs.

A warm wind was in their faces as the road curved southwest. Groups of pursuers stayed after them, hoping for a fall that would force them to stand and fight it out, where superior numbers would tell.

Larry Snow, glancing back over his shoulder, could see the red glow over Lynxboro, where the jail was still burning. His heart hurt, for Toffy Drew. The sheriff had been honest, decent, his friend. Now he was dead, but he had died protecting the right.

"They'll pay for it," Snow muttered. "For Billy Mann and Fred Varis and Toffy."

It was an hour before the last wad of enemies gave up and turned their animals back toward Lynxboro. More and more had fallen behind, and finally the remnants, fearful of running into an ambush, since the odds in their favor were reduced, quit the chase.

Lathered Square S mustangs, and the mounts of Drew's deputies were heaving, as their riders collected around Snow. The rancher counted noses.

"Eleven—with me, that's an even dozen!"

He found the "makin's" and fixed a smoke, passing the sack and papers around. The reddish glow from the burning cigarette lit his bruised, sweat-damp face. The hair was plastered to his brow under his Stetson, as he pushed his hat back to cool off.

He had twelve men to fight Hogshead Hugo Byers and Apache Wurtz, who had enlisted more gunnies, riffraff of the saloons, imported killers. The sheriff was done in, and Lynxboro belonged to the enemy. Larry Snow and his men would be shot on sight.

He had one slim hope—that Hachie Ames might find Colonel Burns quickly, and that the rancher would be able to send aid at once. That meant they would have to fight off the enemy for a couple more days, provided all went well.

"What next, boss?" inquired Arizona

Kegg, leg cocked up as he smoked.

"Next we hit the monte, find some water, and then sleep," Snow said.

He led them off the road, and slowly they pushed almost north by the stars. The going was rocky, with stretches of dense chaparral and stunted evergreens growing from a sandy soil. Big hills rose on the west, and the river lay before them.

They found a little rill, took care of the animals, and then themselves. In a pine woods they made a bivouac, and Snow took first turn at guard, watching the horses, listening for possible pursuit.

He turned in later and slept the sleep of exhaustion. It was dawn when he awoke, a clear, hot day. Summer was coming on, and with it the dry season.

Everybody was hungry. A couple had received scratches that needed attention—cleansing, bandaging.

"Where's Frankie?" inquired Snow, looking around to see that all his men were present.

"Shucks, I ain't seen him since I turned in," growled Arizona Kegg worriedly. Ince was his boon companion, his pardner.

THEN they heard a carbine shot, and all grew alert, fingering their weapons. Kegg, spurs clinking, leather chaps rustling on his strong legs, hurried to a point where he could see for a distance in the direction of the explosion, and Snow joined him.

"Here comes the old sidewinder!" exclaimed Kegg after a minute.

He started to meet Frankie Ince whose reddish hair, freckled face and snub nose were unmistakable.

"He's carryin' somethin'!" called back Kegg.

Ince had been hunting. He had spied a longhorn in the first rays of dawn, a wild creature that lived in the brush and came out to drink and graze at dark. They were glad to see the steaks which Ince had carved from the dead animal.

"No brand on her, boss," he told Snow. "Reckon she was one of our'n that crossed the river when she was a calf, before we could brand her."

Shorty and one of the deputies were already collecting pine twigs to start a fire. It wasn't long until they were broiling strips of beef on sharpened sticks, and then they ate. There were a few biscuits among them, and they considered themselves fortunate.

The horses were watered, and they got ready to move.

"We goin' home, boss?" inquired Kegg.

Snow shook his head. "Hachie'll fetch Burns and his men to Muller's, yuh savvy. No use to ride way around to the ranch, and have to start right back. I don't want to miss Hachie."

"Why don't we make Muller's?" suggested Ince. "He'll hide us, and we can take it easy for a day or two."

"It ain't a bad idea," Snow said thoughtfully.

They were cut off from a direct run to the Square S by a series of long rises, with sheer drops, which were parallel to the river for many miles. They must head east, and that would bring them within a short run of Lynxboro, in order to cross the stream.

Snow had his field-glasses. As they started for Muller's place, he rode to a height to sweep the visible terrain, on the watch for the enemy.

They were two hours from their bivouac when he signaled his men to hide themselves. Then he joined them.

"They're beatin' the bushes for us, boys!" he said. "We'll wait here."

Riders were out, without doubt trying to trail them. Through the noon heat, Snow and his men remained hidden, and finally the hunters quit, retiring toward Lynxboro.

Larry Snow led his men on a narrow path which wound down to the river, and they crossed, checking carefully. Lynxboro was only three miles below them now.

It was slow going at times, and Snow had to check up every so often to make sure they were not running into an ambush. Apache Wurtz knew this country as well as Snow did, for the outlaws had chased through it for years, and Wurtz would know every spot which was good for an ambush.

They were twenty miles south and east of the settlers' camp now. The country, save for the land close to the river, was dry, rising in rocky steps from the valley of the stream. Now and then they had to dismount to pull their mustangs over some steep point.

It was late afternoon when Snow, leaving Tar Baby with dropped reins below the crest of a ridge, crept to the summit with his field-glasses, to survey the neighborhood surrounding Jake Muller's. The road from town lay a quarter-mile off. He could see a section of it, as he lay flat and began to check

up. His men waited for him below, hidden by the contours of the land.

As a band of riders appeared on the stretch of brown road, he tensed, pressed close to the rock around which he was observing. There were five—no, six—no, eight. They kept coming around the curve, until he had counted ten. He focused his glasses, keeping the lenses shielded from the sun so as to betray no telltale glint.

"Byers' men," he muttered.

They left the road, turned up a path, their horses straining at the climb. One by one, they disappeared in a woods which covered the flattish height below the ridge on which Snow was hidden. Snow swore.

"Muller's ain't more'n half a mile beyond them woods," he thought.

It was irritating. Now he dared not budge, for to go on toward the contractor's would expose him and his men to observation from the woods.

HE GREW alert again as he saw several more horsemen on the road from Lynxboro. They also took to the woods path, and soon were out of sight on the trail of the first he had seen.

Snow's men were resting, but grew impatient after a half-hour. Arizona Kegg crept up to consult him. "Keep quiet," ordered Snow. "Byers' fighters are collectin' in them woods over there."

"S-s-t!"

The insistent signal was from Square S men below. A pebble landed near Snow and Kegg, who glanced down, to find Frankie Ince frantically motioning them to come down. They obeyed at once.

"Apache Wurtz and at least fifteen hombres are comin', boss!" whispered Ince excitedly. "We can smear 'em if they come close enough!"

Snow ordered the mustangs muzzled—a neigh might betray their position in the cut. He crept up to the other crest, lower than the one on which he had been. He saw a line of riders crosing the area to the west, keeping to the lower reaches which were easier for horses to negotiate.

Ince was right. For Snow recognized the gargoyle head of Apache Wurtz, the bandit chief, and several of his henchmen, among them Red.

It was a question whether to expose his position by opening fire, or not. It was tempting, to be in ambush and see the targets riding past. He could pick off one, perhaps even Wurtz himself, with a good carbine.

Yet at the first crackle of a gun they would be galvanized to action. It was a long shot, and there was good cover near at hand that the enemy might utilize. Snow and his party would be cut off from escape that way, and the sounds of the fight would undoubtedly bring the Byers' gunnies out of the woods on their backs.

"Hold it—and tell the boys to hold it!" Snow whispered to Ince, who crawled back to retail his orders.

The men stayed quiet. Snow decided against starting something he couldn't finish, and the moment passed, as Apache Wurtz and his gang, fierce-eyed devils, heavily armed, on powerful mustangs, passed from his range of vision behind the jut of the ridge.

They waited, keeping silent, ready for defense. At last Snow crept up to his eyrie on the crest of the ridge. He saw Wurtz and his men entering the woods. As he watched, more Byers fighters came along the road.

He was uneasy, felt pressed. The enemy was collecting forces over there—for what?

Suppose they went after Ulman and the other settlers? Or should attack the Square S in force, with only Pedro and another wrangler on duty there? Desperation at such thoughts nearly overwhelmed Snow.

It was late in the day, and the sun was red in the sky. He was cut off from Muller's till night fell, anyway, and he could not hope to marshal enough force in Lynxboro to defeat his foes. Certainly Byers would have the approaches to the settlement watched, and Snow would be lucky if he got in to town without being killed!

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CHAPTER XIV

Plans

DARK fell, and Snow was still hidden in the cut.

"Who's got a pair of moccasins?" he asked the Square S boys after a while.

Kegg had. They were oiled, supple, and tied with leather thongs about the ankles. Snow pulled them on, after removing his spurred riding boots, which made noisy, hard walking. He discarded his Stetson, tying his hair back with a dark bandana. He also left his cartridge belt, and heavy leather chaps, and smeared dirt on his face and hands. His trousers and shirt were dark enough not to reflect any light in the fresh night.

"Kegg!" he called.

"Yeah, Larry?"

"I'm leavin' you in charge here. Don't move, unless yuh have to split up and run, or are actually run upon, savvy? I'm goin' into them woods for a look-see, and if I can, I'll make Muller's under cover of the dark."

"Take one of us along," begged Kegg. "It'll be safer."

"No. I can travel faster alone. If I ain't back by three A. M., pull out and head for the monte, boys. Wait there till Hachie gets back with help.

They were silent. But he could tell their thoughts, for he could see the glow of their eyes as they watched the dark, lithe figure of their leader move off.

He slipped several times on the steep face of the ridge as he descended the east side. Then he was in more open country, with the thick woods a black unknown expanse in front of him. He had a six-shooter in his belt, spare cartridges in his pocket, wrapped in a cloth to prevent them clinking together, and his knife. But he did not intend to fight unless forced to.

It was like feeling in utter blackness for a wild beast you knew might be lurking just ahead or from any angle, as he stole into the woods. The underbrush was thick at points, and it was impossible to move without breaking a twig now and then or making faint sounds in the leaves. Then the cold sweat would prickle all over him and he would crouch, listening, fancying he heard enemies all around.

He was fighting for his own life, of course, but he knew that more than that depended on whether he won or lost. Joan and her friends were looking to him. And he hated to think of Hugo Byers and Wurtz coming off triumphant. They had plenty to answer for.

Suddenly Snow heard a man laugh. The sound carried in the forest aisles. He was down, flat, listening, trying to place it. There were some big boulders among the woods to his right, and the faint night wind brought to his flared nostrils the odor of woodsmoke and of broiling meat.

He began to follow this up. He crawled up the rough side of a rock, and through a vista saw a fire, screened by a clay bank and casting its light on a shack made of logs and branches hidden in the depth of the woods. The little depression, a clearing by the hut, was filled with men.

Hogshead Hugo Byers stood facing the gathering as they ate broiled steak sandwiches and drank from various bottles. He was talking, apparently had been talking for some time. He was just concluding some orders he had been giving.

"—and the chief'll pick yuh up at the crossroads at midnight."

Larry Snow had managed to inch nearer enough so he could make out the final words the gambler and saloon owner addressed to the gathering in the forest clearing. Snow lay hardly daring to draw a deep breath, for fear it would betray his position. There were a couple of sentries, but they were close in, lounging against trees, their rifle butts on the dirt, and watching the crowd. Evidently they felt safe.

"What's the matter, Hugo, you too big to come along?" said someone jestingly.

"I'll come if yuh'll carry me," Byers said instantly. "Otherwise yuh'll need a derrick to get me aboard a mustang."

There were shouts of laughter. The outlaw crew were in fine fettle, with plenty of whisky and warm sandwiches available, and with cigars and other smokes being handed out free.

Close to the huge Byers crouched the appallingly ugly Apache Wurtz, his small eyes shining like twin shoe buttons. Snow recognized members of Wurtz' gang—Red and the others—and the strong-arm men,

bouncers, gamblers and toughs of Byers' following.

THERE also were a number of hard-faced, heavily-armed fellows who no doubt had been imported by Byers for the occasion. Such gentry could always be picked up for a price.

"Here's the plan, in a nutshell," went on Hogshead Hugo, as the laughter subsided. "Our first object is to finish the Square S. We're goin' to wipe it out, and we'll hope to get Snow and his gang while doin' it. There's to be no more half-way measures, savvy, no more foolin'. Snow's fought us too hard, he's made too much trouble, and he's got to be taken care of. Here and now I offer a thousand dollars cash for Snow's scalp."

Byers was serious. His face had the look of an overstuffed owl's as he let the reward offer sink in. Breaths came faster. It was a small fortune.

"He shore wants my hide," thought Snow.

But it was natural enough. Byers feared Snow, feared his vengeance, and what the rancher knew about his outlaw connections. There was a great deal at stake.

"Boys," said Apache Wurtz, leaping up and waving a wad of greenbacks, "I'll add a hundred more to that, though I hope to kill Larry Snow myself!"

A candle burned in the shack behind Byers. The door was open. Then Snow saw someone in the entry, and his mouth fell open. It was Marvene Young, his dance hall friend. She was smoking a cigarette, and came out, boldly looking over the gathering.

"You boys make big talk," she said, her voice loud and shrill. "But you haven't got Larry Snow yet! You'd better split up and behave yourselves, because if he catches you right you'll wish you'd never been born!"

"Aw, dry up," cried Apache Wurtz.

Catcalls and whistles greeted Marvene's bold speech, throwing a dash of cold water on the spirits of the gang, whipped up to killing pitch by the exhortations of their leaders.

Apache Wurtz, ugly as sin itself, reached out a clawing hand and gripped Marvene's bare arm.

"Come here!" he ordered. "Yuh're a purty kid but yuh need to learn some sense! Why don't yuh be my sweetheart for a while?"

She punched him in the face with all the force she could muster and Wurtz, swearing and spitting, recoiled for an instant. Then he started for her to punish her. Hogshead Hugo intervened, placing his ugly carcass between Wurtz and the girl.

"Leave her be, Apache. You, Marvene, get back in there or I'll tie yuh up agin, savvy?"

She laughed, tossed her pretty head, and went back into the shack. So she was being held a prisoner there in the hut hidden in the woods!

Hugo Byers signaled for attention, and resumed his speech. "There's plenty in it, boys—good pay, free likker and smokes, all the loot you pick up. Plenty of hosses at

[*Turn page*]

"Looking for Trouble, Are You? Well, We Can Accommodate You!"

GOVERNOR DAVID BRADLEY'S face showed cold disdain as he eyed fighting scout Gil Morgan, who had dared to challenge him.

"Take this man to the fort," said Bradley, "and throw him in a cell."

The soldiers seized Morgan. And just at that moment the crowd parted to let Elizabeth through. At sight of Morgan, in his bruised and groggy condition, her face went dead white.

"Gil!" she cried in anguish. "Oh, Gil!"

Gil had no chance to speak to her. Captain Pedro Racheval came forward at Bradley's command and took charge of the prisoner. He slapped Morgan hard across the face—and then began toying significantly with a deadly knife.

Morgan marched through the night with a soldier on each side and Racheval behind him. And every moment he expected to feel the bite of the knife in his back!

Racheval had him in his power—but the tables were to turn in TEXANS FIGHT FOR FREEDOM, an exciting complete action novel by Robert Sherman coming in next month's issue. It's a mighty epic of embattled settlers under Sam Houston's banner—and their battle for liberty. You'll thrill to the adventures of Gil Morgan when he joins them in their struggle—and acquits himself in a way that will make you proud of America's heritage. Look forward to TEXANS FIGHT FOR FREEDOM!

Snow's, too. Take what yuh fancy and burn the joint down. Soon as that's over, we'll circle back and hit them fool farmers. They ought to chase easy, after a shot or two. Then we'll be finished with it, and the country will be ours."

"Yores, yuh mean," said a dry voice irreverently.

"Well, that's right, but it's why I'm payin' you fellers," replied Hugo Byers quickly. "Fair enough, ain't it?"

If Larry Snow had been desperate before, now he was frantic, as he heard the enemy cold-bloodedly planning his destruction. They would burn his home, loot the Square S, run off his horses. No doubt they would shoot Pedro and old Mike, the two guardians. They hoped to trap Snow at home, too.

Then they would strike at Ulman and the settlers, gun them, drive them off. They held Marvene, his friend, a captive. She was a dangerous witness against Hugo Byers and his bunch.

Snow knew now that he could not wait for Hachie and Colonel Burns. Midnight was only a couple of hours away, when these men would strike.

"I'll have to try to get to Muller," he decided. "It's the only chance. Mebbe Jake can supply enough men to turn 'em."

He inched back, forced to move so slowly. It was difficult not to jump up, to hurry, for he was driven by the need for speed. Muller's home lay only a half-mile to the north of the hidden shack in the woods, where Hugo Byers had a hide-out, where he had collected his killer gang, but it seemed miles away now.

"Better go it afoot, and pronto," decided Snow.

It was too far to walk back and pick up the boys. He would get to Jake's, give the alarm, see what the contractor could do, and borrow a horse to ride back and get his own men.

REACHING the edge of the woods, Snow hotfooted it toward the low hill on which Muller's ranch stood. Soon he could see its lights in the house windows. There was a lantern hanging in the blacksmith shop too.

Snow had a tentative, desperate idea. When the main gang started out, he and Muller, with a few men, might seize Hogshead Hugo Byers and rescue Marvene. A warning could be sent to George Ulman for the settlers to take to the hills and hide until they could get over and beat off the ravening attackers.

Snow stayed off the road and the lane. For all he knew, Byers might have Muller covered. The enemy might be aware that the contractor had offered to help Snow.

A dark shadow in the night, keeping to the bushes out of the rising moonlight, Larry Snow climbed the back slope toward Muller's house. He crouched, well out, to reconnoiter. There were some horses near the open front door, and he could see cigars glowing on the porch. That might be Muller and some of his friends, however.

The bulk of a stable invited him. He reached it and went to the corner. There he saw that the blacksmith shop would give him cover as he approached the house to check up, make sure Muller was free, not a prisoner of Byers.

The shop, he found, peeking through a wide crack between boards, was empty, although a lantern with its wick turned low hung from a central beam, and the forge fire showed reddish under the gray of the ashes.

Voices startled him. A couple of men had just emerged from the stable behind which he had been lurking a few moments ago. He could hear the crunch of their feet in the gravelly earth, and dodged inside the blacksmith shop to elude them, concealed by the bulk of the brick forge and chimney.

The speakers did not spy him. They went on, toward the house.

CHAPTER XV

Valuable Captive

CLOSE at hand where Larry Snow hid was a pile of discarded horseshoes. His eyes automatically took them in, with the other objects about him. The light was none too good.

He took a step to leave the shop, then turned back and picked up one of the shoes. It had not been off the hoof too long, and it lay on the top of the heap. It had a Y-shaped split in it, and Snow's heart began to pound.

He couldn't believe it, and yet he couldn't

miss it. The man who killed Fred Varis, Joan's father, had ridden a horse shoed with that shoe! The peculiarly shaped split in the metal had been imprinted on Snow's trained tracker's brain, seared by the grief and agony which Varis's death had brought to the girl he loved, and to him because of her.

"It couldn't be Jake Muller!" he thought, completely bewildered.

He squatted there, the horseshoe lying flat in his work-hardened palm. It hypnotized him, and his mind was confused as he sought to unscramble the jigsaw puzzle of events several days old, events which had been dimmed because of later violent experiences.

"He shore wasn't ridin' on the hoss with this shoe when he was with Hachie and me afterwards!" his thoughts went on.

There was a good answer to that, he decided. The animal with the split shoe might have gone lame while Muller was out, by picking up a piece of gravel which worked into the crack. Or Muller might have grabbed another mount simply because he had run the first to a frazzle.

"Why couldn't it have been Muller?" The next thought was logical. With the pointer starting him on the right trail, the bits of the puzzle he sought to solve began to fit into place. "He admitted ridin' out with Varis a ways! They might've argued over money—and Muller savvied Varis had a big lot of dinero on him!"

Was Jake Muller connected with Hogshead Hugo Byers? Allowing this, it would have been simple for the contractor to plant poison on the range. In his business he had free run of the land.

He heard riders approaching from the lane. If this fresh suspicion of his were correct, he knew he was in mortal danger, for they would kill him on sight! For Muller would be included among his foes.

Snow slid to the door, peeked out. Not far away stood a broken-down farm wagon, in the yard, away from the in-trail. The way seemed clear, and he had to make it. In a few bounds he reached the shadow and crouched behind the wagon. Just a minute later three horsemen swung around the stable and blacksmith shop and went toward the house.

Seeing them silhouetted against the light, Snow was sure that one of them was Red, Apache Wurtz' lanky lieutenant. And when Jake Muller's broad, squat figure showed in the doorway, Snow knew he was right, for he recognized Red's hoarse voice as the outlaw spoke to the contractor for a time.

Larry Snow chose his next point where he could pause in his retreat—a clump of brush. He made it, and the drop of the hill hid him as he started back with all speed to join his men in the cut west of the woods rendezvous.

He was alone, on his own save for the handful of cowboys of the Square S. He had had a narrow squeak, and turned cold when he thought how close he had come to walking straight into Muller's hands.

"I been a fool," he thought angrily, as he scurried on. "But the only one I've had my eye on is Hogshead Hugo, and Muller has been mighty clever the way he stayed away from suspicion."

He recalled Byers' words, when the fat gambler had addressed the gathering of killers assembled at the shack in the forest—"The chief'll pick yuh up at the crossroads at midnight!"

"The chief," he decided, was probably Jake Muller. And it was Muller who was going to lead that murderous pack of gunmen upon the Square S, and against the settlers!

As Snow raced on, the sweat was rolling down his hot face from the exertions he had undergone. But his mind was still going at top speed, and a puzzling point grew explainable as he shifted leadership of his enemies from Byers to Jake Muller. The stout saloonkeeper had always feared Larry Snow. He had made loud threats, of course, because Snow had killed his brother Curly, but the man did not have the positive qualities of a leader, evil or good. Byers was slow and liked to talk, rather than to strike. But with Muller behind Hugo, prodding him on, it all grew logical. Hogshead Byers was big enough, Snow thought with grim humor, for anyone to hide behind!

HE remembered having heard stories concerning Muller. It was rumored that the contractor had had a shady reputation in the past. But no one actually knew anything much about Muller. He had come from other parts, several years ago, and settled near Lynxboro. It all fitted in.

"I'd like to get hold of Byers," thought Snow, pressing toward his waiting men. "I could break Hugo, given time and the right screws to put on him."

He was worried, too, about Marvene Young, who had sent Toffy Drew to his assistance. Byers seemed to be protecting her, but there was no saying when Hogshead Hugo would leave, and characters such as Apache Wurtz were not to be trusted under such circumstances as drunkenness might bring. They were violent men and likely to go off into transports of fury if balked. Even a woman was not safe when such men were in their cups.

"I've just got to hold Muller down till Hachie gets back," was Larry Snow's final conclusion.

He slipped up to the camp in the cut, where he had left his men. A low challenge came, and he paused, calling out softly. The challenger was Arizona Kegg. The others were dozing, waiting for their boss' return, and worried over what might have happened to him.

"Yuh been gone a heck of a time, Boss," growled Frankie Ince, getting up when he heard Snow come in.

The others also roused from their hair-trigger sleep. They clustered around Snow as he began to inform them of what he had learned. Hastily he told all he had found out.

"Jake Muller's runnin' the show against us, boys! I believe Muller killed Fred Varis, and that Jake's leadin' the outlaw army to destroy the Square S and us all! They aim to hit the farmers, as well."

He told them of Hogshead Byers' speech, of the meeting in the woods, and how Marvene Young was a captive there.

"From what I heard, they'll be startin' for the Square S around eleven o'clock. That'll give 'em an hour to make the cross-roads, where Muller'll pick 'em up and take over. We got to warn Ulman to watch himself and the settlers, and we got to reach the Square S ahead of them raiders and try to defend it. But Marvene Young's a friend, and she's in the soup because she gave me a hand. I believe we should try to set her free, before we do anything else. What say yuh?"

Every man there was for it, no matter what.

"The main gang'll move from that shack camp over there, to ride with Muller," continued Snow, his eyes glowing in the dim light. "We might even capture Hogshead Byers. I doubt if he leaves that hut tonight."

"It's almost eleven now, Boss," said Ince restlessly. "Let's go."

They checked their weapons and saddled the mustangs. Snow resumed his chaps, boots and Stetson. He left the woods first, leading Tar Baby over the rough ground, toward the outskirts.

A deputy waiting there was holding the horses. The men quickly mounted and followed Snow toward the hidden outlaw camp in the forest.

Reconnoitering, Snow found that the main gang had departed. The clearing was almost empty. He could see two or three guards around the shack. The door was closed, and a wooden bar had been dropped in slots across it. The windows were too small to admit a human being. Marvene could not escape from her prison.

Snow waited for a time, ears strained to the wind. He wished to be certain that the army of foes had a long enough start so that chance gunshots would not fetch them back to the spot.

In whispers, Snow sent his cowboys creeping in a circle to surround the clearing. When they were in position, he jumped up, charging swiftly in.

There were only four gunnies at the shack. Kegg felled one, Frankie Ince tackled another, disarming them before they could shoot. Snow's Colt barked once, as a hard-eyed fellow threw up a carbine to fire on him. He aimed well, and his target went down. The fourth, rousing from a nap, surrendered, throwing up his hands and begging for mercy.

Snow leaped to the barred door of the shack and ripped off the wooden two-by-four.

"Marvene! You there?"

"Larry!"

She rushed to him, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"I'm so glad!" she cried, almost hysterical with relief. "I was afraid they'd killed you! You've got to hide, Larry—or run for it! Jake Muller's behind all this. He's in cahoots with Hugo Byers, and Apache Wurtz! They want your ranch. They've held me prisoner here ever since Hugo found out I warned Toffy Drew they had you in the stable behind the saloon!"

WORDS fairly tumbled from her lips, as she sought to tell him all she had learned. Her body trembled in his arms as Snow held her, the woman who had risked her life to save him.

"Yuh're shore one fine gal, Marvene," he commended. "None braver, none better!"

He thought she was going to cry, but she looked up at him, smiling.

"Have you got Hugo?" she asked.

"Where is he?" Snow said sharply. "Ain't he in the shack?"

"No, I was alone in there. But Hugo's around."

They looked around quickly, as an angry voice broke on their ears.

"Here, you, lemme be! Take yore paws off me!"

Arizona Kegg and Frankie Ince, grinning broadly, appeared from the trees, shoving the fat saloon proprietor ahead of them.

"Heard him crawlin' off in the bushes, Boss," reported Kegg. "Sounded like an elephant rollin' in the twigs. He was sleepin' mighty cozy in a hole over there."

Byers wore a gun-belt, and a holster, but the holster was empty. Ince had his pistol.

"He's slow, slow as molasses," said Frankie. "Tried to draw but it was a joke."

Snow scowled as he faced the trembling Byers.

"Yuh fat lobo, Hugo!" he snarled. "Yuh're goin' to get what yuh got comin'!"

Always afraid of Larry Snow as Byers was, the fat man was stunned by the sudden reversal of fortune which had placed him in the rancher's power. His jowls shook, his great body was as lax as a mass of jelly. His eyes were wild with fright.

"Don't—don't shoot me, Snow!" he chattered. "I—I didn't want to do yuh any harm, but they made me come in with 'em!"

For effect, and further to worry Hugo, Snow dropped a hand on his Colt butt, glaring at his prisoner. But he did not at once speak to the man. Instead, he spoke to the Square S boys who had tied and gagged the other captives.

"Toss 'em in the hut and lock the door," he ordered.

"What yuh goin' to do with me," babbled Hugo Byers.

"Give yuh what yuh deserve."

Hogshead Hugo was a valuable captive for Snow. But the saloon man was too fat to ride at any speed. Snow did not wish to lose him, however, and he had to figure how to dispose of the prisoner.

There were spare horses, belonging to the captured guards, picketed near at hand in the woods. Marvene Young could ride well, so they saddled one for her. At gun point, Byers was boosted on another, but Snow knew he would slow the pace too much to suit him.

Snow led Kegg and Ince aside. "Take him over to the cut, tie him good and gag the polecat, boys," he instructed. "We'll pick him up later, when we got the time to handle him right."

"Where you bound, Boss?" asked Kegg.

"We'll shortcut straight for Ulman's camp. We'll wait for yuh there, if yuh don't overtake us. Keep off the road, though. That big mob'll be startin' soon with Muller at their head."

With Marvene Young riding beside him, Snow set out. His men were at Tar Baby's heels.

He had to move fast, to keep ahead of Muller's army. So many would necessarily be slower than the well-mounted Square S, expert riders who knew every trick of horsemanship.

The swifter in the gunny gang must wait for the others, which would give the Square S a chance!

CHAPTER XVI

The Smash

NIGHT was far advanced when Snow saw the dark bulks of the tent camp in the Domes, and his men and Marvene, panting from the hard ride, clustered about him. George Ulman roused from his sleep, at Snow's call.

"What's up, Snow?" the leader of the farmers asked.

"Danger, Ulman. Rouse everybody pronto."

Joan heard Snow's voice. Soon she came from her tent, to greet him. She wore a light wrapper and slippers. Her hair hung in braids.

"Larry!" she cried. "I haven't been able to sleep, worrying about you!"

Marvene Young was silent. In the moonlight, she stared at the white oval of Joan's face. Joan saw the dance hall girl, and looked at Snow inquiringly.

"This is Marvene Young, Joan, an old friend of mine," he said. "She saved my life

the other night and she's helpin' us. Byers had her prisoner and we brought her out."

"I'm glad you've come," said Joan. She held out her hand to Marvene.

The dance hall girl shrugged, and shook hands, but she had little to say. Joan led her into her tent, and Mrs. Ulman bustled about Marvene, helping her to clean up, offering coffee and food.

Ulman had his people all roused now. Snow spoke to them as they gathered about the Square S.

"First off," he said grimly, "yuh've got to know that Jake Muller's a killer and against us. I believe he's the man who killed Varis. Why he done it, I don't know, but I aim to learn."

He told them quickly what they must know, of their danger.

"Take yore folks in the wagons, move out of here, and hide in the Domes for the time bein'," he ordered. "If Muller finds yuh, promise to sell out—anything he wants, savvy? Accept any offer he makes, just to gain time. That's what I need, till I can marshal help. The sheriff's dead. They killed him last night in town. Muller had a dynamite trap set for us at the jail."

"But how about you?" asked Ulman. "We want to help yuh as far as we can, Snow."

Snow shook his head. "Best help is to keep out of Muller's way for a while, as I say. They're headin' for my ranch first off, and that'll take 'em a while."

"Let some of us go with yuh and fight!" urged Ulman. "I'll be glad to, Larry."

"Me, too!" chimed in Lewis Day.

The rest were eager to fight for the rancher, too.

"No," said Snow. "We've got to ride like crazy. You fellers would slow us down, Ulman. I'll leave Marvene Young with yuh, though, and I'd be obliged if you'd take good care of her."

"We'll do that," Ulman promised, and the next moment was giving orders.

Wagons would be hitched up and, with the women and children in them, they were to be taken to a hiding place in the low hills.

A quick meal was served, and the Square S ate. Joan sat by Snow, offering him food, hot coffee.

"I wish you'd take me along, Larry," she said plaintively, but she knew she could not go with him.

In the shadow of a tent, Snow kissed her good-by.

"Take care of yoreself, Joan," he whispered. "I'll be back for yuh."

Time was pressing. He had to make sure that Muller did not change his plans, and come after the farmers on the way out to raid the ranch. The Square S men and the deputies were mounting, as Frankie Ince and Arizona Kegg rode in. They reported that they had hogtied Hugo Byers and left him in the cut. One more thing had to be attended to. Since Ames would fetch Burns and his Lazy B to Muller's, Snow had to despatch a man to hide near Muller's and flag them.

Kegg and Ince snatched a bite, and followed as Larry Snow hit the trail for the main road leading from Lynxboro to the Square S.

The moon was silver, casting a white light over the range, as they reached the road. The Square S was only a few miles on, westward over the beautiful land. A pang of worry seized Snow. He loved his home and it was painful to think of its danger, with Muller riding on it to raid and destroy it.

Snow called a halt and dismounted after checking up. There was no sound to warn that the enemy was coming.

He cupped a match, hiding its flame in his hand, and studied the dirt track for a time.

"They ain't passed here yet," he observed. "Let's get our breath and wait for 'em."

But he sent Shorty on to the ranch, to warn the two there of the coming attack. Also, ammunition and more weapons must be made ready.

TWENTY minutes later, Kegg galloped around the turn.

"They're comin', Boss!" he panted.

Weapons were checked for the tenth time. The Square S, a handful of fighting cowboys against an army of outlaws, girded themselves for battle.

They were close to the turnoff which led to the settlers' encampment. Snow's keen eyes were fixed upon the bend, bathed in moonlight, when the first horseman appeared, a dark blob in the silver glow. Then came two behind him, followed by a group close on the leaders' heels. Snow quit counting. The road was teeming with his enemies.

Larry Snow opened fire, his shrill yell of defiance ringing over the rattle of the guns. His cowboys joined in, howling their opinions and threats of Muller and his killer crew.

The first shots stopped the vanguard. But the outlaws saw how thin was the Square S line, across the road. Pressure from the rear and Muller's sharp commands, sent them on, and now they came faster, at full-tilt, shooting volleys from Colts and carbines as they rode.

Lead whirled over the Square S. Snow didn't want to lose any men—and he couldn't afford to. He had struck at this point because he wished to be certain the raiders did not hit the farmers first.

"C'mon, boys!" he yelled. "We're ridin'! Keep just out of easy range."

The Square S rode off, on the road. Snow hung back, watching to make sure that Muller and his bunch passed the turnoff. It was with real relief that he saw the crushing pack of wolfish riders whirl past the road that led to the settlers' camp, and howl it up on the Square S trail.

Ulman and his men would get their people away now, hide them, and give Snow time to fight.

He settled down to riding, swinging now and again to shoot back, drawing the outlaws who could ride like the Square S crew, and swiftly Snow's men drew away from their pursuers. Soon they were out of sight, and when they pounded into the ranch-house yard, there was not even dust rising on the winding trail to mark the course of the raiders.

In moments more they were in the ranch-house, behind barred doors, preparing to defend Larry Snow's home to the last.

JUST twenty minutes later, Arizona Kegg, posted at the east window of the ranch-house, yelled:

"Here they come, Boss!"

Snow leaped across the room to look out. From the trees down the line, riders were appearing, the vanguard of Jake Muller's army, come to smash the Square S.

How beautiful the world was, thought Snow, with a pang. It was men in it who made the trouble, men such as Muller and Byers, with their avid ambitions. The first gray light of the new day was on the lovely hills where stood Snow's home, the low house of pine logs. Those walls would stop even a heavy bullet.

Luckily, the attackers could now be seen. Had they arrived in the darkness, which had been Muller's first plan—something unforeseen must have delayed him—it would have been more difficult. Snow had but a handful to oppose the combined gangs, and even though he had decided to hold just the house itself, his line was thin, even for that.

When they had arrived so short a time before the first of Muller's men, the mustangs ridden by the Square S had been heaving and lathered. Snow, forced to think of what would happen if they were driven from the ranch, had to spare a man to lead the horses off to a secret glade some distance away from the buildings. He must have mounts, in case he had to retreat again. There had been just time enough for this move, and to break out spare ammunitions and weapons before Kegg had sighted the raiders.

Snow felt sure, though, that he could hold them off for a time, at least—until Hachie Ames could arrive with help. The rancher had prepared for a siege. There was a gravity feed wooden pipe from the spring above, leading into the kitchen. But he had also had big tubs and pails of water drawn, in case the enemy destroyed the conduit water, and there was plenty of canned food on the shelves.

SQUARE S cowboys—Kegg, Ince, and Shorty—and the deputies, who were the remnants of the deceased Toffy Drew's posse, squatted before windows on the four sides of the house, covering the approaches. The thick-slab doors were barred from inside. The windows were up a few inches, to permit the marksmen easy aim on targets outside.

The outbuildings worried Snow. They were within easy range of the house and would provide cover for the foe in attacking the house. But he could do nothing about them now.

He crouched at the front window, his field-glasses leveled.

"I see Muller—Apache Wurtz and Red are with him!" he called. "They've got men from Lynxboro, and some of Muller's hombres, as well as the outlaws. Some I ain't seen before. Reckon they were imported for the smash at us. Hold yore fire till I give the word, boys."

Muller's squat figure was mounted on a big gray stallion. The contractor had a shotgun in one hand, and was flanked by Apache Wurtz and a strong-arm lieutenant from Hugo Byers' staff. Bunches of tough riders surged up the slope, and there were more

and more of them coming. Carbines, rifles and shotguns, Colts, and spare belts of ammunition bristled menacingly in the crowd.

"It's a long shot—wonder if Muller'll come in closer?" muttered Snow.

He placed his glasses on the floor and picked up his fine long-range rifle, made sure there was a cartridge in the breech.

Muller was giving orders as his men came up. They kept looking at the ranchhouse. Some took out flasks, or uncorked canteens to drink. Others were checking their guns in a businesslike manner. Red, Wurtz' man, beckoned to several of the gunnies and came toward the house.

Jake Muller turned his gray, starting toward a clump of tall pines where he would have ample protection from fire.

"Now or never!" thought Snow, and took aim.

He had to squeeze the trigger before he wished to, because others, up the slope a bit from Muller, would intervene. The rifle cracked, and Muller's stallion reared violently and threw the stocky contractor into the grass.

Red veered, and opened fire on the house. His men, too, let go with all they had, dashing for the bulk of the stable.

"Let 'em have it, boys!" ordered Snow.

His voice was sharp, loud enough for those in the kitchen and side rooms to hear. Kegg, Ince, and the rest began to shoot, and the house rang with explosions. Jake Muller had rolled up to his feet, leaving his dead horse, and dashed to the safety of the woods.

Red and his men felt the cutting lead as they tore around the stable and stopped there. The fire dropped off as the gunnies hastily took cover, startled by the shot which Snow had made.

In the pause, Red's voice sang out:

"Hey, in the house there! Snow, Larry Snow!"

"What yuh want?" the rancher shouted back.

"We're givin' you and yore boys a chance to live, Snow!" bawled Red. "If yuh throw down peaceable-like, we'll turn yuh loose soon as we're finished here!"

Snow smiled grimly. It was a thin invitation. Jake Muller could never afford to let them go free. They would be damning witnesses against him and he would never be safe. Nor would any of those involved in the cold-blooded attack on a law-abiding cowman.

"Go back and tell Muller he'll have to think up a better one than that, Red," Snow's voice rang through the hills. "You sidewinders better take to the woods, or we'll mop yuh up!"

CHAPTER XVII

Explosion

EVIDENTLY the raiders had not expected Snow to surrender without a fight. It had been just a stab—what Red had tried. The men in the ranchhouse could hear Red singing out Snow's defiance to Muller and Wurtz, who were hidden in the pines. From the kitchen came Shorty's voice, warning:

"They're workin' 'round this way, Boss!"

And from a side room, a deputy called:

"I spied a couple runnin' afoot on this side, Snow!"

They were circling the clearing in which the buildings stood.

It was nerve-wracking, waiting, braced for the charge that was being prepared. The attackers were getting into position.

"I keep thinkin' about that bomb Muller set at the jail for Toffy and you, boss," drawled Arizona Kegg.

"Me, too," said Snow. "I don't blame you, Keggie."

It was not fear that prompted Kegg to make the observation. He only wanted to be sure that Snow took that angle under consideration. Snow had been thinking about it, and now he warned his men.

"We'll have to watch close, boys, for men with sticks of dynamite or cans made up as bombs, savvy? It'll take 'em a sec to light a fuse, and they'll have to show when they try to throw 'em. Don't miss."

The enemy was impatient. As Snow's defiance was hurled at Muller, the circling of the Square S was completed. Raucous cries rang out in the surrounding woods. Shrill whoops of men encouraging their companions and themselves to charge, sounded with the opening volleys of heavy weapons.

"Here they come, chargin'!"

Riders burst from the trees or whirled around the rising contours which had con-

cealed them from the men in the house.

Snow was cool, waiting for the right moment, letting them get within easy range.

"Now, boys!" he shouted. "Give it to 'em!"

Bursts of fire crackled from the house windows as the Square S answered the fusillades. Slugs rapped in the thick logs, some came through the windows. Smoke and dust rose in the morning air, and in the east a red band showed, heralding the rising of the sun.

The enemy rode low, for the most part, shooting at the openings, whooping it up in an effort to fluster the men inside. Snow hunted eagerly for Jake Muller's squat figure in the charge, but the contractor was still hidden, lying back and directing operations. The embattled ranchers glimpsed Apache Wurtz, at the rear of his men, urging the outlaws to the attack.

At the second volley from the house several mustangs were downed, and men were cut by Square S bullets. The leaders swerved off and pelted into the woods. They did not like the lead whirling about them and they made plain targets in the daylight.

The house stood off by itself—which was a blessing, thought Snow. At least it would be difficult to toss explosives without the bombardier being exposed. He fully expected Muller would try it.

There was a lull after the first general charge, as Wurtz, Muller and the others consulted.

"They're eatin'," reported Frankie Ince. "What yuh think of that?"

Red and several of his men were still hidden behind the stable, fifty yards from the house. The bunkhouse was next to it.

Inside the ranchhouse, the boys took drinks of water, and checked their weapons.

"Watch careful for anybody carryin' what might be a bomb, boys," warned Snow again.

The enemy breakfasted, taking it easy under cover. But tension grew among the besieged, as the sun came up, bright and hot.

"Take turns catnappin'," ordered Snow. "We'll need some shut-eye."

He couldn't settle down himself, but kept watching for Muller's next move, his fine rifle loaded and ready. It was an hour after the opening charge, which had proved a fiasco, when Larry Snow caught a movement in the pine grove into which he had seen Jake Muller streak.

At that moment, guns began to bark at the other side of the house, and many men whooped it up. Several Square S fighters rushed to help in what looked like a new attempt at frontal attack.

Snow looked around as if to join them, then stuck at his window. For he had seen a rider on a black mustang dash from the woods toward the house, carrying what looked like a tin can in one hand.

Snow allowed him to get near the stable. He saw the fellow hunch over, the cigar bitten between his teeth glowing red as he lighted a fuse attached to the can. But before he could hurl it, Snow put a bullet into him. He crashed and his black galloped off, leaving the can rolling on the ground.

A MOMENT later there was a loud, heavy explosion. Glass rattled, the house shook, dishes and other loose objects adding their cacophony. The bomb had exploded within a few yards of the stable, and for a time the dust it raised obscured Snow's view. But when he could see the stable, he saw that one side was caved in and that the riders who had been hidden there were on their way to the safety of the woods.

Snow laughed.

"What happened?" asked Kegg.

"They started a man in to toss a can full of explosive at us! I got him just before he made his toss, and all it done was flush Red and his boys from the stable!"

But even as Larry Snow enjoyed his triumph, he knew it would be short-lived. Now he was aware that Muller had brought along explosives and it was only a question of getting a bomb into the house, to finish them. During the daylight that might be prevented, by sharp watchfulness and quick, accurate gunfire. But at night the enemy would be able to creep in close enough to do the job.

"One thing's certain," he thought. "We can't stick here after dark."

It made him sick to think of giving up the place to Muller. They would loot it, destroy it in wanton fury.

He had plenty to think of, as he crouched, peeking from the side of the front window. He thought of Joan Varis and her friends, and of Marvene.

"Wonder how they're gettin' along together?"

He was pretty sure he had drawn Muller off from the camp. The outlaws expected to strike the settlers later, when they had finished off Snow. He could not hope that Hachie Ames would get back for another

twenty-four hours, at the least, and that would mean Ames had made perfect connections after a quick trip, had found their rancher friend, Colonel Burns of the Lazy B with enough force to start immediately for the Square S.

Looking back a short time, he could hardly realize he was the same man. He had been so sure of himself, and of his luck. The Square S was his, he controlled the world about him. He had been kingpin of the district, with power and influence, and self-sufficient.

Now he knew that he was not self-sufficient. To be complete he needed Joan, the girl he loved. But he could do nothing for her, even. He was under vicious attack, pressed to the limit, with but a slender margin between his men and himself from violent death.

The fate of the Square S, coveted by Jake Muller and Hogshead Hugo Byers, trembled in the balance. If Snow died in the battle, the two rascals would get the ranch one way or another. With Snow gone, Hachie Ames and Colonel Burns might be taken care of, and the settlers disposed of.

All Muller needed to do was kill Snow and his few loyal followers, and he would triumph. Burns could not stay around forever. Ames could be drygulched, put out of the way, leaving the evil allies in full control.

"Hachie don't even savvy yet that Muller's behind it all," Snow thought uneasily. But since he had sent a man to hide near Muller's, to warn Ames and Colonel Burns when they arrived, he hoped all went well.

His eyes were heavy with sleep. The birds sang in the trees, and in the warmth of the yard, gay-colored butterflies winged. In the distance, Square S cattle lowed, and now and then came the familiar, pleasant neigh of a horse from the pines where the gang had their mounts.

The world was beautiful. Snow had a lot to live for—Joan, his home and he was young.

He touched the thickened bridge of his nose, his head nodding. Unconsciously his eyes closed. He slept. . . .

It was afternoon when Larry Snow started awake. So weary had he been that he had not even dreamed. Kegg squatted at his side.

"Yuh had a nap, Boss," Kegg said. "We let you sleep. There was nothin' doin'."

They had taken turns on guard, but Muller had not budged. The besiegers were sleeping, or watching the house from vantage points. They had liquor and food along, and they, too, were tired from the long ride, the chase, the fight.

"Waitin' for dark to fall," thought Snow.

He was hungry and thirsty, and went to the kitchen for water and something to eat. Pedro was peeking from a window. A couple of other Square S men snored on the floor.

"Muller's shore of us," decided Snow. "And them wolves with him don't cotton to daylight attacks, not unless they can do it safe. He's figgerin' on blowin' us out of here tonight."

FERVENTLY he wished he could hold for another twenty-four hours. Muller did not know that he had despatched Ames on the run to the Lazy B. As it was, Snow was hanging on by his teeth, and he knew it.

"Muller's mighty snaky," he thought angrily. "He had me fooled all the time. Found out my plans—and I near walked right into his hands the other night!"

He was still smarting over that, and over his close call. His attention had been on Hogshead Byers, Muller's front man, and on Apache Wurtz. And all the time, it had been the contractor fighting him!

Billy Mann—Fred Varis—Toffy Drew!

"Wonder how many Muller done in, besides Varis! Drew, no doubt. I'm shore Muller made up that bomb trap at the jail, because he savvies explosives. Mann was killed in town. He might have seen Muller with Byers, heard somethin', and they caught him. Byers ain't the killer type—not unless he's agin the wall."

Thoughts kept running endlessly through his busy brain, as he sought the answers to many riddles. Muller loomed, darkly large, the threat to all he held desirable.

The hours sped. He knew that each minute brought them closer to the hour of decision.

The sun was dropping. Then it enlarged, growing red as it prepared to set, and the shadows of the big pines lay long over the yard. Muller was certain of them, waiting, like a big spider might wait for its prey.

And in his pine-tree shelter, Muller spoke now to his silent, fighting men.

"Get ready, boys. We're pullin' out as soon as dark falls."

They all knew why. In the night, Muller's men could creep in close and blow the defenders out of the ranchhouse. The raiders had watched all day, but men of the type who threw in with outlaws and killers such as Jake Muller, preferred to work in as much safety as they could find. . . .

In the ranchhouse, preparations were being made for another move. "Which way, Boss?" asked Kegg.

"Kegg, I want you to go first," Snow said. "Yuh all savvy where Mike is, with our hosses, and we'll make it one at a time. Each man as he gets there'll take his mount and ride to the far spring, and wait. That'll save some, in case one's trailed. Mike can make the spring, in case it's necessary. I'll be last out, and then we'll see what we can do next."

Snow's face was grim as he set about loading his guns, deciding which to take along. He chose three six-shooters, and his favorite carbine. He must leave the rest of his weapons behind—all those finely engraved English shotguns, big-game rifles that ran into hundreds of dollars apiece, his entire splendid collection.

There were his personal effects, too—pictures of his father and mother and family, his clothing, his books, and other things he loved. But all he could take was ammunition to fight with, and the few guns most easily carried.

CHAPTER XVIII

Last Gap

FINALLY the last red rim of the sun showed through the vista to the western mountains. Night fell suddenly, like a black blanket cast on the earth. The moon was not yet up, and the Square S must utilize this dark hour.

Kegg knew where to go. He would creep from an open window on the side nearest the pines, try to make it without alarming the enemy.

Snow waited at the door, which he had opened a crack. He had his carbine in his hands. He peered into the dark, his ears strained. The sounds of crackling twigs, of night birds winging, the stamp of horses came to him preternaturally clear.

It seemed a long time before Frankie Ince touched him and whispered:

"Yore turn after me, Boss! Come on! I heard 'em movin' in!"

A gunshot rapped in the night, and loud shouts arose.

"They must've seen Pedro—he was last out!" Ince said, and swore.

Snow sighted a dark bulk, a man streaking across the yard. He held his fire, for there was no use to expose his position.

"Try the back way, Frankie," he said in a low voice. "I'll be with yuh in a jiffy."

Ince touched his hand, and hurried off. The enemy appeared to be all around now. More shots exploded, and Snow saw the flame of the weapons. To the left, as he prepared to run for it, he caught the startling blue sparking of a lighted fuse.

With a muttered oath, he fired into it, then turned and ran for his life.

As he dropped from the open window in the rear, and his feet touched the earth, still warm from the sun of the day, he paused, peering across the yard. But the enemy seemed to have faded away, back to the pines. He could not see any figures, and the shooting had stopped.

"They'd be back, if they were ready to toss bombs," he decided. "Now for it."

He drew in a deep breath and dropped flat on the ground, a Colt ready in his right hand.

He was on the dark side of the house, but he could see plainly, for stars blinked in the patch of sky. The pines stood out black against them. He sought in the darkness for enemies. They might be just ahead of him.

He began to crawl, straining his eyes ahead. Then he saw, again, from the corner of his eye, that bluish, distinctive flashing of a burning fuse. It came from his left, and the man holding it was near the end of the ruined stable.

Snow jumped up and dashed into the pine grove, gun raised.

He glanced back, his hand against the bole of a big evergreen to steady him. There was a blinding, flaming flare, the stunning whoosh of an explosion at the house. Dirt and chunks of pine slabs began raining down, but the dust cloud helped hide his retreat.

He was fifty yards farther on when a second bomb went off, and the house began burning.

He kept low, snaking through the woods, up the hill toward the rendezvous. The house

was burning brightly, when he looked back again, and at the sight he grew sick at the pit of his stomach. In the clearing he saw some of the enemy, waiting for the Square S men to be forced out by the flames, if they had not died from the explosions and shock.

Two men loomed to his left. He waited, tensed for action, believing they had seen him, but they went on toward the buildings. Their eyes were on the fire.

Faithful Mike, an older man who served around the ranch as spare wrangler and yard man, a fellow Larry Snow had plucked from a shambling life around the town saloons, was waiting in the glade, holding Tar Baby. Mike had a good horse for himself, and he grinned as he passed the reins of the beautiful black gelding to Snow.

"Plumb glad you made it, Boss! Cuss 'em, they're lightin' quite a bonfire back there, ain't they?"

"It's the house, Mike," Snow said in a choked voice. "Let's get goin'."

Soberly Snow mounted. They were lucky to have made it, and Mike told Snow the rest of the Square S had slipped through safely to get their mustangs. As they rode from the glade, Larry Snow could see the red glow of his burning home over the trees, and hear the wolfish shouts of Muller's gang.

"Time, time!" thought Snow desperately. That was what he had needed, and hadn't been able to gain. He needed time to import allies, help enough to best Muller's army, but now the Square S was burning. He fought hard against the confusion in his brain, at being forced to leave his home to the mercies of his foes.

TRAILED by the faithful Mike, he went to the farthest of his springs, and there found his men assembled, waiting for him. The moon was showing above the treetops now, lighting the dark spaces.

"Boys," he said, "I got an idea—one last fling to delay 'em a while longer. We'll take a look-see at their hosses. I believe they got 'em in the pine grove below the house. Foller me."

They circled around the hill and dismounted, leaving Pedro and Mike with their mustangs. On foot, the Square S followed the agile, stealthy Snow as he flitted through the tall evergreens. The house was burning madly, the glow ruby in the sky.

As they neared the grove, below the elevation on which the ranchhouse had been built, Snow sighted a smaller glow, that of a campfire built in a rock nest in the woods. It was the enemy's cooking place. There they had made coffee and fried beef for their suppers.

He left the boys with Kegg, and wormed in. A large band of mustangs stamped restlessly and neighed inside a corral formed of lariats stretched between the bare boles of tall pines. He could see several of the killers on guard, watching the mounts, which were vital to the raiders, but more of the attackers were hunting for the Square S men.

Shouts, a shot as someone fired at a shadow, helped cover Snow's faint progress, as he inched back to his men, and signaled them to follow. His orders were relayed back along the line.

The mustangs in the rope corral had been unsaddled, for they had stood there through the whole day and evening. They would not break through the ropes of the temporary pen, unless stampeded. Larry Snow, a knife in one hand, skin rubbed by the pine needle carpet he was creeping along, jumped up and sped toward the spot.

Kegg was on his left, and Frankie Ince to his right. Snow slashed at the tough lariat, sawed through it. Kegg's tall figure loomed as he worked on another lasso forming the pen, and Ince was busy at his side.

A guard saw them and whipped up a shotgun, shouting the alarm. The covering cowboys fired, and the guard's shotgun went off, but the buck drove into the ground. A blast of bullets from the Square S stopped the other sentries, and their shots were only part of the general hullabaloo the Square S now raised.

With flaring guns under their noses, the mustangs bunched, then began to run. Urged on by expert handlers, the Square S, the horses rushed out of the broken pen into the woods, and split up into small groups and singles.

"Hey, Apache—Muller!" Frantic appeals for help came from the outnumbered sentries. "Here they are—stampedin' our hosses!"

The house was a mass of flames, the illumination spreading all the way into the pine grove. Against this, Snow saw running bunches of the enemy, hastily coming in answer to the alarm.

"Let's go, boys!" he called.

They sped back to their mustangs, mounted and raced off.

"That'll give us a little more time,"

thought Snow. "Don't know how much good it'll do, though."

It would take the enemy hours perhaps, to round up the frightened, jittery mustangs, many of them none too easy to catch even in a corral.

There was but one way for the Square S to go. Snow led his hard-bitten crew toward the road, and they settled down to ride. He expected that Muller, having disposed of the Square S stronghold, and pressed by the necessity to destroy Snow and his men, would come hunting him, and at the same time probably try to attain his second objective, which was to crush Ulman and the rest of the settlers. He spoke of that to the boys.

"We got to stand between 'em and Muller," he told them.

The battered Square S, worn from the long fight and hard riding, finally reached the turnoff to the tent camp. The camp was deserted, of course, as Snow had sent the settlers into the Domes to hide from Muller's gang.

"We'll stick here, fellers," Snow said. "We need a nap."

He drew them off the road, but picked Kegg to lie near the highway and watch, and put sentries on duty. . . .

The new day was upon them when Snow grew alert and raised his carbine. From his right, coming from the direction of town, he heard the swift clop-clop of a galloping horse. As he peered from the clump of bush at the winding road, he saw Hachie Ames come around the turn, riding at full-tilt, bent low over a long-legged chestnut gelding.

SNOW'S heart leaped at sight of his best friend, but then he sobered, for Hachie was alone. He stepped out to signal Ames who seeing a man suddenly come from the brush, whirled to a stop, whipping up a Colt.

"Larry!"

It took Hachie a moment to recognize his usually dapper and self-contained companion in the battered, thorn-ripped fellow who stared up at him.

Greetings over, it did not take Snow long to acquaint Hachie with all that had happened during his absence. Hachie told his own story, which brought a grin to Snow's haggard face.

"We're waitin' here now for them raiders to show up, Hachie," said Snow. "They'll come—soon as they can round up them mustangs."

Hachie stretched, and nodded.

"Yeah," he said, "and mebbe they'll be in for a surprise."

An hour later, Larry Snow squatted by the dropped tent flap, peering out at a band of approaching riders.

"It's Apache Wurtz with a big bunch of his own, and Byers' gang," he whispered to Hachie Ames, who was hunkered beside him in his hiding-place at the farmers' camp.

Everything looked natural around the camp in the Domes. Gear and equipment stood about, and the flaps were down. It appeared as if the settlers were still sleeping since it was still early. Snow had his carbine loaded, and ready.

"I don't see Muller," he breathed, hunting for his arch-enemy.

Wurtz, the gargoyle-faced bandit, was in command. There were about forty with him. Some were outlaws, others were strong-arm men from the Rope & Irons, and hirelings brought in by Muller and Byers for the purpose of wiping out the Square S.

Snow watched Wurtz signal his men to circle the tents. Hard-faced, bearded riders, with shotguns and carbines rising, swung into two lines which cut around both sides of the camp.

"Now!" growled Snow.

He had a bead on Wurtz, and opened fire. The first shot cut the outlaw's leg, and sent his horse plunging in crazy gyrations. Apache Wurtz howled, and swiftly disengaged his feet from the stirrups as his mustang crashed to the earth.

"First blood," muttered Larry Snow, exultantly. "Now we'll see! Get set, Hachie!"

CHAPTER XIX

Clean-Up

HEAVY gunfire broke out from other tents, as the outlaw gang rode right into Snow's trap. Lying flat on the ground, the Square S ripped the lines, and the killers fell back, their own shots flying high and wild. Yells and profanity rose over the camp site.

"Throw down!" Snow bawled the command, his carbine slashing into them.

Hachie Ames, Kegg, Ince, and the rest were busy breaking the foe's spirit to fight.

Many turned to run. But suddenly heavily armed riders in leather and big Stetsons dashed in to cut off all avenues of escape. A huge Texan, with a graying spade beard and flowing mustache, and a face as red as a lobster, was bawling commands that rose high over the rattle of the guns.

"Kunnel Burns enjoys a good scrap," remarked Hachie.

It was the Lazy B. They had been a short way behind Ames, when Snow had met Hachie who had been anxiously hurrying ahead. Snow's man near Muller's had contacted and given warning to Snow's allies, Snow had filled in what Hachie didn't know.

"Let's get out and give 'em a hand!"

He jumped up, and rushed outside, the tent. He left his empty carbine, and was drawing a six-shooter, when Apache Wurtz, trying to catch the reins of a horse with an empty saddle, turned at his shout to surrender.

Wurtz saw him coming, and read the answer. He was lame, and blood was pouring from the slash where the carbine slug had struck. He had a second's grace, and he pulled a Colt. He tried to whirl on Snow to make the kill, his snag teeth clenched, his gargoyle face screwed up with his hate for the rancher.

"You—devil!"

Wurtz got off a shot, but it only kicked up the dirt a yard from Snow's spread feet. Snow's Colt had roared a flash ahead of the outlaw leader's, and Wurtz caught it square. Nose smashed in, brain punctured, the bandit chief teetered, and fell as Snow bore in.

Colonel Jefferson Burns, owner of the big Lazy B, who had come at Snow's call for help, was bellowing orders. Killers were throwing down their guns, raising their hands, begging for life. They were cut off, and Wurtz, their field chief, was gone.

Burns dashed up on his huge dapple-gray stallion, a fiery-eyed brute only half-tamed. He was a magnificent horseman, and his teeth gleamed between his bearded lips as he leaned over to grasp Snow's hand.

"Mighty glad to be of assistance, Snow. Ames brought yore message and we didn't spare a minute. Started right over."

"Thanks a million, Colonel!" Snow said fervently, gratitude plain in his eyes.

They had accounted for about sixty per cent of Muller's forces, thought Snow. Some evidently had left the Square S with the contractor who had not bothered to appear at the camp. Wurtz had been sent by Muller on the supposedly simple task of destroying the settlers.

Prisoners were being disarmed, secured. Snow and Burns consulted.

"I got to have Jake Muller, Colonel, or it's all no use," Snow said positively. "He's ringleader."

"Let's find him, then," boomed the colonel.

Pedro rode in—he had been hidden just off the road.

"Ze Senor Muller, he ride for his ranch, I theenck," he reported to Snow. "Apache and zis bunch come een here."

"Let's get after Muller," said Snow grimly.

They left a few armed guards on the captives, held in the tents, and turned toward Muller's ranch.

The sun was hot, well up in the sky, when they sighted Muller's. Snow had led them off the main road, a couple of miles from Muller's turn-in, and they had crossed the country to reach the contractor's ranch. Saddled horses stood in the yard, and there were a number of men around the place.

"S'pose we dismount, Colonel, and git in as close as we can," Snow suggested.

"Yuh're the doctor, Larry," agreed Burns.

Snow took the lead, with Burns at his side. Armed well with Colts and carbines, the Square S and their allies, the Lazy B, spread into a semi-circle and started up toward Muller's.

Now Snow had the advantage, in numbers as well as in fighting spirit. With Burns' men, he had marshaled nearly fifty, and there were not more than thirty or so left to Muller.

Snow and Burns each took a wing. The Square S boss headed for the blacksmith shop, stepped inside, and picked out the Y-split horseshoe. He hooked it in his back pocket.

"Luck," he thought.

MULLER'S place was quiet. No doubt the men were resting, eating and drinking, before starting out to hunt down the Square S.

Snow was alone in the shop for his men were still below the drop of the land or covered by brush and sparse woods out from the buildings Suddenly he tensed, as he peered through a crack in the wooden plank walls. Jake Muller had appeared on his

front stoop. The squat, wide chief came down the steps and walked straight toward where Snow was hidden.

Teeth gritted with his hate for Muller, who had brought on the trouble. Snow watched his arch-foe walk right into his hands. Muller came to the forge, turned in the open doorway.

"All right, Jake! The jig's up!"

Muller stopped short and gulped. Then he essayed a smile.

"Why, Snow," he said easily, "how'd you get here? Had any trouble? Mebbe yuh want me to give yuh a hand?"

"Both hands. Reach." Snow had a Colt cocked and aimed.

Muller looked hurt. "What's wrong?" He put up his big hands, square as boards and as hard, to his shoulders. "I don't know what's got into yuh."

Snow reached around with his free hand, unhooked the telltale horseshoe and tossed it on the floor where Muller could see it.

"Yore hoss wore that when yuh shot down Fred Varis, Muller," he accused grimly. "I found it in the pile over there, and it give me the warnin' that led to yore exposure. Yuh been leadin' the fight agin me. Yuh not only downed Varis but yuh set that booby trap at the jail for Toffy Drew and me—only I didn't happen to walk in, and just Drew was killed. Yuh been in cahoots with Hogshead Hugo Byers and Apache Wurtz all the time, after the Square S!"

Muller's face had turned dark as Snow rattled off the damning facts.

"Yuh savvy a lot, don't yuh?" he sneered.

"Yeah, and more! I got Byers. He's scared silly and he'll—"

There was a shout, a gunshot from the direction of the house. Some of Muller's men ran out, weapons ready.

Snow glanced from the open door of the forge. A bloated, staggering figure was slowly coming up the hill, hardly able to place one foot before the other. It was Hogshead Hugo Byers. He fell to his knees, one hand on the ground as he puffed for wind.

When he came in close to the smithy, Snow hailed him.

"Step in here, Hugo! Yore pard's waitin' for yuh!"

The fat man's eyes were underlined with his suffering. Somehow he had managed, after long hours, to saw through his wrist bonds, and free himself. Weakened from his ordeal, he had practically crawled all the way to Muller's—only to find himself again in Larry Snow's hands.

Snow whistled shrilly, giving the signal. Colonel Burns and his men, the Square S, and the deputies came running in, whooping it up with the shrill Rebel yell of victory.

"Cuss yuh, Jake!" gasped Hugo Byers, eyes yellow with his fear. "What's goin' on? You got caught too!"

Muller scowled at him. Snow was grinning.

"You'll talk, Hugo," he said, "or I'll skin yuh alive. The game's up, and yuh're beaten."

"It was yore idea, Muller!" accused Byers, shaking violently. He collapsed, sinking to the dirt floor of the shop. "I didn't kill anybody, Snow, so help me! Muller shot down yore Billy Mann, he killed Fred Varis, he set that bomb at the jail, he—"

"You fat yeller-bellied snake!"

Jake Muller, panic-stricken as he realized it was over for him, with his remaining men running from the guns of the cowmen, and with Hugo Byers squealing his guilt and ready to blab anything, had to act. Snow knew that, and he was ready as the powerful contractor cursed and dived, seeking to evade the moving muzzle of the rancher's Colt.

Muller made a good draw. He had a short-barreled .38 revolver under his shirt in a shoulder holster, and he brought it out with trained speed. His face was strained, set, and vicious.

His only chance was to kill Snow, perhaps rush for a horse and ride before the others closed in.

The contractor felt the bite of Snow's bullet. It cut into his right shoulder, but as he recovered, falling sideward, he gritted his teeth against the shock and pain and pulled his trigger. The .38 snapped, and Snow felt the burn of the slug against his left leg. An instant later he fired again, and Muller was hit in the heart.

"Zing zang zou!" Snow said, teeth gritting in his anger.

The heavy-set contractor rolled over, grunted, and his arm dropped.

He lay with his nose in the dirt of the smithy floor.

LARRY SNOW stood holding Joan Varis with one strong arm. He was a bit lame, with his left calf bandaged where Muller's bullet had cut the flesh.

But it was all over. With Wurtz and so

many others taken, and with Jake Muller dead, it had been easy to clean up the fleeing survivors of the amalgamated gangs. Hogshead Hugo Byers was a prisoner, ready to tell all he knew, just on the chance it might soften his fate.

It was two days since Muller had gone down under Larry Snow's gun, and the Square S had won.

They were at the tent camp now, to which the settlers had returned when the enemy had been defeated. Ulman, Phillips, Day, and the rest, with their wives and children, had gathered to hear what the rancher had to say.

"First off, folks," said Snow, "I want yuh to know that Joan and I are gettin' married as soon as we can have the knot tied."

They applauded, and congratulations were in order.

"And I got more good news," Snow went on, smiling with pleasure. "We picked up what we thought was arsenic on the range, and Hachie took a sample to the Government chemist at Coffeetown, and the report come to me by mail this mornin'. I was wrong! That stuff ain't arsenic, and it wasn't planted there by Muller to poison my cows. No, it's copper ore, the chemical man says, and mighty rich stuff, worth a million! I checked with Hugo Byers, and he says that's what got Muller so het up. At first they'd thought they'd down me when they could, and take over the Square S. Byers and Wurtz had it in for me, and Muller's little real-estate scheme with the flatiron stretch, usin' Byers for a front, had done so well they were hungry for more.

"Not unwillin' to make a few dollars, Muller took on the canal job for you fellers. While ploughin' and makin' cores, he hit that ore. It ain't far under the surface of the flatiron stretch and that section of my range. He brought enough up in spots so that when some of my cattle drank the solution it made with rain water they died from it. Many copper combinations are poison.

"Muller knew a bit about minerals, as he had done a lot of excavatin' work, and he checked up, found it was copper and valuable. But while he was gettin' started, Fred Varis happened along, with that money. Varis was an expert metals man. He guessed what that green ore was, and said so to Muller. Muller grabbed a hoss and rode out a ways with Varis, who refused to throw in with Muller and help cheat me. Varis said he was goin' to ride straight to the Square S and tell me about the find. So Muller killed him, to keep the secret from us. I got a lot of this from Byers, and figgered out the rest. It all jibes."

"Yuh mean we can sell that stuff for money?" asked Ulman.

"Yes, sir. For plenty. There's a big demand right now for copper. We can sell some of the range, and I'll make enough to rebuild my home and plenty to spare. You folks can take yore profit and buy good land. I savvy where there's some, with water to spare."

"I—I wish Marvene had stayed, Larry," said Joan. "But she wouldn't. I begged her to."

Snow had a note in his pocket, left for him with Joan by Marvene Young, his loyal friend of the dance hall. It read:

She's sweet, Larry, I'm sorry I was catty about her. She's better for you than I'd ever be. Good luck, boy. I'm going to Mexico and set up shop there.

Joan was close to him and his strong young arms held her. He glanced at the mighty range, his range, and knew he had won, won everything worthwhile.

Coming in Next Month's Issue

TEXANS FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

A Complete Action Novel by ROBERT SHERMAN

Lem Hakes dropped his rifle and sprawled over the rock

BUZZARD LAW

By RALEY BRIEN

U. S. Deputy Marshal Tom Barson gets some unexpected help when he takes the trail of a vicious bank robber!

AS THE soft dusk dropped over the wastelands, Tom Barson came to the water-hole. The hot air was lifting already, and a brisk breeze was sweeping down from the hills. It shifted the sandy earth with a sibilant sound, and obliterated tracks, but not before Barson had found the sign he was seeking.

It told him that a rider had been at the water-hole not long before. His mount's hoofprints were in the damp earth at the edge, and boot tracks also, and Barson could see the prints of a man's knees where he had knelt to drink. So Barson knew he was on the right trail. Lem Hakes—outlaw, murderer, thief—was not far ahead.

The water in the hole was low, stagnant, scummy. With the brim of his sombrero, Barson swept aside the scum and drank. He filled his canteen. Then he let his jaded pony drink.

He did not camp beside the water-hole for the night. Lem Hakes might double back and find him there, catch him off guard, blast the life out of him as he slept. Hakes was the sort to do a thing like that.

Barson got into his saddle again and rode for a couple of hundred yards down a coulee, unsaddled, and picketed his pony in the shadows where the mount could nibble at wasteland growth. Barson's own evening meal consisted of a few morsels of cold food taken from a saddle-bag.

With his saddle for a pillow, and his rifle and six-gun close at hand, he bedded down with a single blanket beside a clump of brush where the bright moon, now rising, would cast a protecting shadow.

It was both useless and dangerous to try to follow Lem Hakes after nightfall. The trail might be lost in the maze of rocky canyons. And Lem Hakes, from ambush, might shoot him out of his saddle. He would make a fine target riding in the bright moonlight.

At twenty-eight, Tom Barson was a Deputy United States Marshal. He had been appointed because he had known this stretch of wasteland from boyhood. Also, he could ride like a fiend, was an excellent shot, and had courage. He was proud of the badge he wore. It was something fine, he thought, for a man of his age to be a deputy marshal.

He hoped to reach his trail's end tomorrow. It was his task to catch up with Lem Hakes, overpower him, and take him back to Sandy Mesa to answer for his crimes at the end of a rope.

FIVE days before, Lem Hakes had emerged from the wastelands to make one of his periodic one-man raids, and had chosen the village of Sandy Mesa as the scene of his exploit. He arrived in mid-afternoon when most of the townsmen were enjoying their siesta. At the store, he filled a large grain sack with provisions and gave the storekeeper a sneering laugh for payment.

Then he crossed the street to the bank, in front of which he had left his horse at the hitch-rail. He tied the sack behind his saddle, and entered the bank. Nobody was there except the old banker and pretty Juanita Garcia, the bookkeeper.

When Lem Hakes demanded money, the banker showed fight. Hakes' gun blazed. He wounded the banker. And a glancing bullet struck Juanita Garcia in the heart and killed her instantly.

"Trail Lem Hakes and bring him in!" That had been the stern order of Barson's superior. "Get him alive, if yuh can, so's we can make him swing. I doubt yuh can do that, for he knows what's waitin' for him if he's caught. But bring him in! This is yore first big job, Tom. Be careful—and make good!"

It was not an easy assignment. Hakes knew the wastelands as few other men did. His hide-out had been there for years. He knew every trail and water-hole. He was a hard man to follow in that country.

But Barson knew the country also, and had trailed his man this far. And he suspected he was being trailed by another in turn. He had been watching the back trail all day for telltale puffs of dust drifting on the wind.

Pedro Garcia, father of the slain girl, was the man Barson believed was trailing him. Garcia knew the wastelands also. In his youth, he had been on the verge of outlawry, and had learned some of the owlhoot trails.

But Pedro Garcia had fallen in love with a girl with all the tempestuous passion of men of his race, and had turned from crime to marry and settle down. Juanita had been the only child of the union. After her mother's death, she had gone to town, studied, and finally had become the bank bookkeeper. Garcia had attained the position of foreman of a large ranch near town.

Barson had almost wept for Garcia at Juanita's funeral. The father's grief had been enough to shake a strong man. He had sworn vengeance at the graveside.

Barson had slipped out of town to take the trail of the killer. But he had suspected that Garcia would be following. It would be a race between the law officer and the grieving father to reach Lem Hakes first.

Barson knew now, from the marks at the water-hole, that he had gained on Hakes. He hoped the next day would bring results. He made himself comfortable in his blanket, glanced around to see that his picketed pony was safe in the shadows, and sought sleep.

He was dozing off when a slight noise startled him. He heard his pony snort. Barson reached for his six-gun, and made sure

his rifle was where he could grasp it quickly.

He heard a horse's shoe strike a rock, and tensed. His pony snorted again. From the night came a soft hail:

"Senor Barson!"

Barson was watching the shadows. He thought he saw a moving one that might be a man on horseback.

"Who are yuh?" Barson called.

"It is Pedro Garcia."

"How do I know that? Ride out into a streak of moonlight so's I can see yuh."

The shadow moved again, and horse and rider were revealed. It was Garcia. Hakes was tall and thin in the saddle, and Garcia resembled a fat toad.

"Dismount and come on toward me," Barson ordered, as softly as he could. "Ground-hitch yore pony in the deep shadows. And be careful."

A short time later, Garcia was beside him.

"I have followed you, Senor Barson," Garcia confessed. "We are on the same quest, it appears."

"No," Barson replied. "You want to kill a man, and it's my job to arrest him."

"He will never submit to arrest, senor, and you know it. A rope awaits him if he does. So he must be shot and slain. Let me do the killing, Senor Barson. Have I not the right? Was it not my little Juanita the beast killed?"

"I know," Barson said. "But we've got laws."

"There is but one law in a case like this, senor—a life for a life."

"Unsaddle and picket yore pony," Barson ordered. "We can't do anything tonight. Hakes passed the water-hole not long ago. But we'd be targets for him in the moonlight. Tomorrow mebbe it'll be different."

PEDRO GARCIA cared for his pony. When he returned with his saddle and a blanket, he opened a saddle-bag and brought out cold tortillas, cold meat and half a cold baked chicken. He ate, and offered Barson some food.

"Let's look at this thing right, Garcia," Barson said. "I'm a sworn law officer. It's my job to get Hakes, if I can, and take him back to swing."

"Why go to so much trouble, senor, when he can be shot out here like a mad dog?"

"It's the law, Garcia, and you know it. I'm goin' to trail on in the mornin' and try to get him. Mebbe he'll get me, then yuh can have yore chance at him. Agreed?"

"No agreement, senor. If you meet and fight with him, you may kill him, senor, and remove from me the privilege which is my right."

"I'm tellin' yuh, Garcia, that if yuh shoot him I'll take yuh in for murder."

"And would a Sandy Mesa jury convict me, senor?"

"Mebbe they'd turn yuh loose. But I'm an officer, and have my orders. I'm to take him in alive, if possible."

"Not if I see him first through the sights of my rifle, senor," Garcia declared. "So it is to be a race between us? Remember the law of the buzzards, Senor Barson, as they wheel the sky and look down for carrion upon which to feed. 'The bird with the keenest eyes is first to the feast.'"

"The thing now is to get some rest while our ponies are restin'," Barson said. "We'll start before dawn. Hakes may double back and try to get me."

"We should take turns watching, senor," Garcia suggested. "You take the first rest."

Barson slept. A few hours later, Garcia shook him awake.

"All has been quiet," Garcia said. "If I could get a little sleep now, senor, it would be well."

Barson put on his boots, stood up and stretched, and took a swig of stagnant water from his canteen. Garcia was making himself as comfortable as possible with his saddle for a pillow and a single blanket for covering against the sudden chill.

"I'll stretch my legs and make shore that our ponies are all right," Barson told him.

He strolled carefully through the alternate streaks of shadow and moonlight. He found the picketed ponies bedded down and resting. The moon was lowering, and soon would come the dark hour before dawn.

Barson watched, listened, but neither saw nor heard anything to cause him alarm. He wondered whether Lem Hakes had stopped for the night or had urged his tired mount on toward his place of refuge. If he had done the latter, the quest would be longer and perhaps more perilous in the end.

Barson turned back and sat down in the shadows beside his saddle and blanket. Garcia was snoring in heavy sleep.

He remembered the law of the buzzards. "The bird with the keenest eyes is first to the feast."

To Barson, his official standing was a serious matter. He had his orders. He must find Lem Hakes, he told himself, and deal

with the murderer before Pedro Garcia, the grieving father, could find and shoot him.

He waited for a little time, then got up quietly, picked up his saddle and blanket, and went softly through the shadows toward where his pony was picketed. Garcia snored on.

He felt, in a way, that he was playing a trick on Garcia. But he felt, also, that his duty came first. He aroused his pony and put bridle and saddle on him, made him ready for the trail. He rode slowly up the coulee, hoping that Garcia would not awaken for a couple of hours or more.

The false dawn was tinging the east with pink when Barson left the water-hole. For a mile, he traveled where he knew Lem Hakes must have traveled the night before. There was no other way. Then he came to a place where Hakes could have taken either of two directions, but the way to the left was toward that canyon in the south where the outlaw might have a refuge.

Barson turned to the left and rode on as day broke and the mist arose from the steaming rocks of the wasteland. He rode with his rifle loosened in its saddle scabbard and with his six-gun ready to be jerked out of the holster at his hip.

He would be first to the feast, he had decided. He would get his man.

THE sun came up and blazed, as Barson rode on. He found some tracks, and knew he was on the right trail. The country became rougher, and there were innumerable spots where ambush was possible, so Barson slowed down and used greater caution.

He watched the trail ahead for telltale puffs of dust that would tell him where another rider rode ahead. He stopped his pony at intervals and watched and listened. He watched the back trail, too, for Garcia.

He was hoping that Garcia, if he had continued following, had taken the wrong turning far back. Barson sympathized with Garcia, but he wanted to get to Hakes first and have it out with him. Because of the badge he wore, whatever Barson did would be legal. With Garcia, a killing would be murder.

The blazing sun turned the wastelands into an inferno. Barson wiped the perspiration out of his eyes with his neckcloth and rode on, watching continually, expecting ambush, ready to go into a gun duel immediately. There had been no signs of Garcia behind him. But the wind was brisk, and swirls of sand and dust were in the air, so one that might be caused by the hoofs of a horse could easily pass unnoticed.

Barson came to the entrance of a winding coulee that was rather wide and had a floor studded with boulders. He found more tracks there, and urged his pony on. He watched ahead and to either side, and glanced behind frequently. The continual strain was fraying his nerves.

Then, some distance ahead, he saw a puff of dust lift over the rim of the coulee and drift on the wind. The puff became a continuous trail of lifting dust. Barson knew a rider traveled there.

The rider must be Lem Hakes. Nobody else would be riding in this country, and Barson knew Garcia could not have got ahead of him. He was getting close to the quarry.

Barson touched lightly with his spurs and rode at a better rate of speed, watching the drifting dust ahead. He made sure that his six-gun was loose in its holster, that the flap on his rifle boot was unfastened.

He glanced behind, and saw nothing to indicate that Pedro Garcia was trailing him. He continued following the winding coulee and watching the dust drift ahead.

" 'The bird with the keenest eyes is first to the feast,' " he muttered.

There was a sharp bend in the coulee, where the huge, water-washed boulders were thick, and Barson slowed down his pony to follow a winding trail through the sea of boulders.

A bullet came from somewhere and snapped his sombrero from his head. There followed the sound of the shot, and a stern voice saying:

"Stop there, Marshal!"

Barson knew it was Lem Hakes who had called. He guessed that Hakes could have put that rifle bullet through his head as well as through his sombrero, had he so wished.

It flashed through Barson's mind that Hakes would not surrender, would never be taken alive to stretch rope, that this was a time for shooting it out. He would never let Barson live after this encounter.

Barson had pulled up his pony. He glanced around at the rocks. Finally he saw Lem Hakes to the left, high up on a ledge, rifle to shoulder and cold eye looking over the sights.

"I could have shot yuh out of yore saddle, hombre," Hakes said, without the rifle wav-

ering. His hand was ready to squeeze the trigger. "Drop yore rifle and six-gun."

"And then what, Hakes?" Barson asked.

"Mebbe I'll let yuh ride back the way yuh came."

"That can't be, Hakes. I'm wearin' a badge. Yuh're under arrest for murder. Anything yuh say can be used against yuh."

Hakes roared his laughter. But he did not toss up his head as he laughed.

He kept his rifle steady and his eye over the sights.

Barson had his left side toward Hakes. He knew he could not get his rifle out of its scabbard before Hakes drilled him. But Hakes was within six-gun range. And Barson's six-gun was at his right hip, away from Hakes.

Barson jabbed with his right spur and at the same instant tried to get the gun. The pony wheeled as the gun came out of leather and Barson whipped it up to fire. Hakes' rifle cracked. The bullet struck Barson high in the left arm. But for that sudden wheel of the pony, it would have reached his heart.

Barson tried to throw his gun around and fire.

"Drop it!" Hakes yelled.

BARSON knew it would be useless to do that. Hakes would play with him for a short time, like a cat with a mouse, then murder him. He sagged in the saddle, and brought up the gun.

Hakes' rifle spoke again. The bullet burned across Barson's breast. He reeled in the saddle and dropped the six-gun.

"So yuh want to arrest me, huh?" Hakes said, as he lowered his rifle. "I'm goin' to drill yuh through the head, tie yuh in yore saddle and start yore pony on the back track. Thinkin' yuh could trail Lem Hakes and get him! I've got a trained pony. I saw yuh follerin'. Sent the pony ahead to make the dust trail. Now, Deputy Marshal—"

Three shots came from up higher in the rocks, so swiftly that the explosions blended like the elongation of one.

"Murderer!" Pedro Garcia screeched.

Lem Hakes dropped his rifle, made a futile clutch at his chest, and sprawled over the rock behind which he had been standing.

Barson, swaying in his saddle, made a grab for his own rifle. But he saw Garcia riding down among the rocks.

"I got him for you, senor," Garcia said. "You were very clever to leave me asleep and ride ahead alone. But I know this winding coulee, senor. I cut across country and caught up with you, and it seems I got here in time."

"Well—thanks," Barson gulped.

"Everything is simple now, senor. I have slain this murderer and avenged my Juanita. But I killed him in defending the life of a law officer, so it is legal, eh? And you did your part, because you tried to shoot it out with him when he had the drop on you."

Barson fought against sudden weakness and pulled himself erect in his saddle.

"I'll bind up your wounds, senor," Garcia said, "and then we will lash the murderer's body across his own saddle, as soon as I catch up his horse, and return to Sandy Mesa. And everything is all right."

Barson tried to smile. "All right, Garcia," he agreed.

"And the law of the buzzard still stands, senor. Senor Lem Hakes had the keenest eyes and was first to the feast. But the feast did not agree with him, no? Hot lead from the rifle of a grieving father is not easy to digest, senor. . . Let us see to your wounds."

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Wild Horses

By JOHN H. THOMPSON

Magnificently free, the roaming herds of the untamed are a picturesque and fascinating sight on Western rangelands.

SOME years ago I was driving down across New Mexico, south from historic Santa Fe. Off toward the high mountains in the West and the Arizona line was a famous spot known as Horse Springs. A little community had sprung up there but the nearby springs themselves got their name because of the herds of wild horses that formerly roamed the section.

Later the region was taken over by a syn-

A typical wild horse runner

dicate of cattlemen who turned it into cow range country.

The road I followed was rough, ribbed like a washboard and full of chuck holes. Suddenly there was a break in the high, almost level desert plain and the road, flanked by two warning signs—"Shift to Low Gear" and "Slow to Ten Miles an Hour" dropped into a narrow, deep dry canyon.

In the clear, invigorating sun-bright air the opposite rim looked little more than a stone's throw away. But there was no bridge. To reach it, it was necessary to tool the old bus, brakes scorching, down around blind curves and hairpin bends on a path that was a minor replica of Bright Angel Trail, widened just enough for a car to make it, fenders almost scraping the wall on the inside and with only a few inches to spare on the outside.

It was no hill for a nervous driver. No turnouts, and the only places where one could pass another car were the thick bends where the road doubled back on itself as it seesawed back and forth down the canyon. No fence or guard rails on the outside edge. Just a clear view of an unobstructed drop into eternity if you failed to negotiate the curves.

No Place For Nerves

Those signs up on the rim were not kidding. Ten miles an hour was a breakneck pace down that canyon. Grinding along at five was safer.

The road up the other side was just as bad. When I gained the far rim I paused to get my breath and let the engine cool off a bit.

And there, parked beside some yucca clumps on the very edge of the canyon wall, stood an old Model T. Steam was fizzing from the spot where the radiator cap should have been, and the manifold was red-hot. The engine hood had evidently long since been discarded as superfluous.

Bed rolls and camp stuff overflowed the back seat. Baling wire and harness straps held a cracked, sun-baked top in place. On the front seat sat a tiny, gray-haired old lady taking in the view. For all the time-etched furrows on her gentle face her eyes were bright and sparkling.

Beside her stood a lean six-footer, ten-gallon hat shoved back on his carrot-topped head. Justin boots cramped his feet, with his trouser legs tucked inside their hand-tooled tops. He rolled himself a smoke as he watched me pull off to one side of the road.

"That's a mess of hill for a gas-buggy," he volunteered, striking a match on his fingernail and puffing luxuriously. "I got a heavy load. Lizzie like to of not made it."

Grazing Service Photos

Wild no longer—horses penned in a corral

There was no argument about the hill. We talked a little, the usual road gossip of one rubber tramp to another.

"Know this country pretty well?" I asked.

"I shore do." The stranger smiled. "My name's Young—Bud Young. Used to catch some of the finest wild hosses in the West right there in that canyon Ma's starin' into. Didn't I, Ma?"

"He did," said Ma Young speaking directly to me. One of the best mustangers in the business, Bud is. Took after his pa thataway. Ain't anybody, white, Mexican or Injun could trap wild horses better'n Bud's daddy. Bud comes next."

Bud was embarrassed. "Ma lays it on thick," he said. "But she means well. They ain't so much to mustangin' if yuh know the game. Most anybody's got good hoss sense can learn it, I reckon."

Ma Young snorted. Bud sat down on the running board of his flivver. I sat beside him, lighting my pipe.

Bud didn't ask me my business, but he could tell I was interested. He talked about wild horses, not from books or hearsay, but from his personal knowledge in a life largely spent mustanging throughout the West. Wild horses had been Bud's livelihood, and he knew plenty about them.

"If yuh know wild hosses," declared Bud, "yuh can follow a bunch at a saddle gait, or a walk and by straight stickin' at it, ride 'em down. But it takes a study of the animal's habits and a shore knowledge of the country so yuh can work 'em into a trap."

"Mostly mustangs travel in fairly small bunches, twenty or so in a herd. Sometimes on rare occasions there'll mebbe be twice that number. Seems each herd chooses its owner leader, a stallion, and always obeyed to the finest order by his bunch."

The Ways Of a Mustanger

Bud fixed himself another quirly, rolled it smooth, twisted the end and lighted it.

"Wild hosses like their own range to graze on," he went on. "Which ain't over twenty-

five miles as a rule, most likely not that much. Queer thing about 'em too, when they're first startled they'll run like the wind, but they won't run far. Pretty soon they'll stop and sniff the air a bit. Then if yuh move in closer, they'll run some more.

"When yuh push 'em 'stead of linin' out for the next county, a wild bunch'll work so far, then circle back. And that's where yuh're smarter'n they are. Yuh got 'em then—more especially in country where's there but few passes or canyons for 'em to head for comin' back.

" 'Course yuh can't chouse 'em through a place once and into a corral next time round. It ain't that easy. Wild hosses spook easy. They'll shy at anythin' they think is a trap."

Bud explained the patience a mustanger had to have to corner a range-free band of wild, unbroken broncs.

"After yuh've run 'em through a pass, or by a particular spot often enough they get used to it and let their guard down. That's when yuh close in. Yuh set yore trap, or shut yore corral on 'em and yuh've caught yoreself a mess of wild hosses."

Mighty Fine Hosses

Right there was where Ma Young had her say.

"That's right," she cut in. "Sometime you get some mighty fine hosses, good for buildin' into real range stock. But a lot of the pore, skinny creatures ain't worth fertilizer. You got to sell 'em for what you can get. The good ones is the exceptions. But when they're good they're beauties."

Bud smiled. "It's a fascinatin', wide-open existence," he said. "But ain't many mustangers ever got rich at it. Leastways none I ever heard of. What with the time spent searchin' out a band and, if yuh can afford it, the help to pay."

"Help?" I asked.

"Uh-huh. It don't make no difference whether yuh pay 'em cash, or a share o' the bunch yuh run down. In the long run it comes out of yore own pocket. Yuh see, the more fellows yuh get to help you corral a band the easier it is. Yuh can station the boys at different points on the range so's to keep the herd movin' where yuh want 'em to."

"Bud" Young, mustanger, tugged at his carrot hair and gazed out over the canyon.

"Sometimes I don't know, mister," he declared, thinking out loud. "Mebbe I should of been a farmer. Trouble is, I can't stand fences. They kind of close me up—inside."

Call Of The Wild

The West's wild horses were Bud's life, just as they were Ma Young's, and had been Bud's father's. In fact there was a time in the earlier history of the Western range when great numbers of wild horse bands ran free and quite a group of men—professional mustangers—made a regular business of catching them.

The business required a definite amount of skill, plenty of horse savvy, and it was highly speculative. Some of the wild horses were fast, hardy and beautiful animals. They got themselves talked about all over the West, a few of them even attaining a romantic legendary fame. Stories of these spurred on the hunt for others like them.

The truth is that the best among the wild horses were generally domesticated animals that had gone off with the mustangs at some time or another. Wild bunches had a habit of enticing gentled horses off to join their life of freedom. Besides being better stock, as a rule these once tame horses were usually smarter than the pure mustangs and harder to catch.

Now and then an expensive blooded stallion imported to improve the horse herd at some outpost ranch escaped to lead a band of mustangs. When this happened mustangers eventually heard of it via the range grapevine and in time both the stallion and his offspring in the bunch became prizes well worth hunting down.

These were the special horses about which songs were sung and stories told until they often became part of the accepted legends of the West.

But by and large as Ma Young had observed, the wild bunches had been pretty well culled out even as early as the 1880's. Good animals were not run down as frequently as had once been the case. The average mustang was tough and stringy and that was about all that could be said of him. If a roundup of them brought twenty dollars a head, that was all they were worth in a land where men spent much of their life in a saddle and were excellent judges of practical horseflesh.

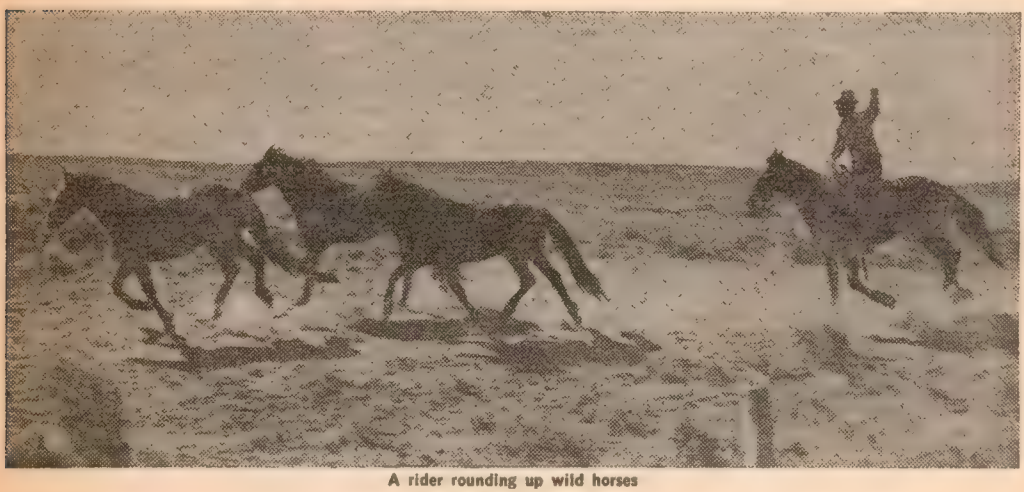
What Is A Mustang?

Straight mustangs are not large as horses go. Thirteen to fifteen hands is their usual

height and their weight generally something between six hundred to a thousand pounds, or perhaps a little over.

This is understandable. Aside from having to graze in the less lush back country to which they were driven with the coming of the cattlemen, the northern bands had the long winters to put through on scant feed, and the bunches in the Southwest were continually up against the ever-recurring hot dry summers to which that region is subject.

Most wild horses are of solid color, with bays and browns predominating. Sometimes in certain sections buckskins are found. But the beautiful ebony black wild stallion was mostly a mustanger's dream. Few were ever actually found among the uncounted thousands of mustangs that once roamed the unfenced early Western range.



A rider rounding up wild horses

Now and then an excellent mustang has been encountered with flashy white markings. But these are a rarity as, strangely enough, are paints among the wild bands.

The Indians seem to have been the first who specialized in and favored paint ponies. Some say that was because of their camouflage possibilities on marauding raids. Better than a solid color, paints blended with the bright lights and shadows of the broken, distant plains horizon and could be hidden almost to invisibility in a far-off copse of cottonwoods.

When A Plow Horse Goes Native

These facts were second nature to a wild horse runner like Bud Young. Wild horses were his book. He told of a place in Wyoming where runners brought in an overly large percentage of solid greys.

"They were larger and stockier built than most," said Bud. "Percheron blood from some early sodbuster's draft horse somewhere back, I reckon."

It is hard to imagine a plow horse going native, but Bud was probably right. The domestic horses first brought West by the pioneers had a flare for the wild life. Once free, they took to the ways of their primeval ancestors and became as wild as any.

As a matter of fact the wild mustangs of the West were not direct descendants of eohippus, the little fellow with the fast legs, and about the size of a terrier dog. He lived on the North American continent back in prehistoric ages when the world was still beginning to form.

Eohippus—that's a fancy scientific name—was the first horse. He got here, scientists say, about forty-five million years ago, millions of years before man. Forty-five million years is a big jag of time. Anyhow that was way before my time, or Bud Young's, or even his dad's and his great grand-dad's time. When you go back that far you get your history out of rocks instead of books.

At any rate, even though eohippus wasn't much for size he knew his way around in the dank, jungle forests of the prehistoric era. He was one of the first mammals to arrive, and he stuck. He learned what to eat and the weird thick bushes and huge, heavy plants of the semi-tropical forest that covered the

North American continent at that time hid him from most of his enemies.

The First Horse Sense

In escaping from the rest he used his head when earlier giant beasts a hundred times his size, like the dinosaur, had hardly known what a brain was. And in a pinch eohippus used his legs. That's how he developed speed. Small as he was, right from the beginning eohippus looked like a horse. You could see it in his legs, his little round body. He was sort of jug-headed, his ears were small and his tail ratty, but he was still a pocket edition of a modern broomtail.

There was one marked difference, aside from stature. Eohippus had no hoofs. He had toes, four on each of his front feet, three on the back. The toes let him get a better grip on uneven ground, and the nails with which they were equipped helped him even more. Those toenails eventually turned into hoofs.

None of the above, mind you, is from personal recollection. It's what the scientists say. Those boys have pried loose the facts of the prehistoric horse with hammer and chisel. They never left a stone unturned or a fossil unclassified till they pieced together the whole story of the first diminutive horse and traced him down to modern times.

Along about the period the horse was growing to size, millions of years after eohippus, something happened which the geologists call the Ice Age. It got plumb cold here. Succeeding sheets of glacial ice spread down and covered much of the North American Continent.

Among the effects of this wholesale precooling was that the horse, dawn-child of North American mammals, disappeared from the picture. So did a lot of other ancient animals, like the sabre tooth tiger, and prehistoric elephants that inhabited this neck of the woods in the formative geological eras of the earth's dim, distant past.

Back To North America

The horse quit South America too, due some say to a mysterious disease that over thousands of years gradually cut him down and whittled him out of existence as far as this side of the world was concerned. He did better in Asia and southern Europe. In time man came along and adopted him. But the next time the horse showed up in America, and that according to the way the geologists reckon time was practically yesterday, he was imported. We've got a record of it.

A fellow by the name of Bernal Diaz del Castilio who was official historian of the explorations of Cortez, the early Spanish conquistadore, tells how Cortez brought horses to the New World. Not only that, but he lists them. There were about sixteen in all. Castilio's list, with his own comments runs something like this:

> A light chestnut stallion, which presently died. An excellent chestnut mare, for sport and racing. A brownish sorrel stallion, no good for war. A light chestnut stallion with three white feet, no good. A dark chestnut stallion, excellent and a fine racer. A silver-grey mare, of good racing quality. . . .

And so on down the line. Those animals, landed some four hundred years ago, were America's first modern horses.

Spanish Horse Lovers

Bud Young looked incredulous at what I told him and Ma Young she acted nervous as if she thought that's what she got for talking to strangers—a pack of tall tales—and that it was time to go.

"Yuh mean to set on this runnin' board and tell me that measly batch of Spanish horsemeat was the forebears of all them thousands of mustangs been runnin' the range since before us Americans got here?" exploded Bud.

"No," I said, "They were just the first horses. But they were a good sample. The others were originally Spanish stock too."

That's true. Shortly after Cortez' first landing other vessels from Spain brought almost a thousand horses along. Some of these, carelessly watched as they grazed, wandered away to eventual liberty.

De Soto brought over more horses when he landed at Florida in 1539. He intended to use them on an inland exploratory trek and got them across the Mississippi. Then a lot of them broke loose and he never saw them again.

One of the most remarkable things about these Spanish horses that found an old and almost forgotten freedom in the New World was the rapidity with which they reproduced in their new environment. The West seemed made for them. Forty years after De Soto discovered the Mississippi the Plains Indians were using horses.

Horse Heaven—The West!

As the wild bands multiplied and broke up into countless groups, the horses spread

throughout the rich grassland country of the western plains. Thence they moved into the mountains and even crossed the Rockies into Idaho and Utah. When the West was theirs, and the Indian's and the buffalo's, the amazing migrations of the wild horse herds represent one of the most fascinating chapters in the entire annals of animal history.

From the practical side, though they were at times a nuisance to the ranchers as the West gradually became settled up, it was the stamina inherent in the wild horses, and in many instances wild horse blood that helped the stockman build up his special strain of strong, fast, light and intelligent cow ponies.

"Now that," cut in Ma Young, looking at Bud, "is something that makes sense. And before you finish this mustang palaver get Bud to tell you about catchin' them by walkin' them down afoot."

I did.

"It's about the same as ridin' 'em down, only harder," he explained. "Ropin' 'em at water-holes is easier, if yuh got a fast hoss and a good rope," declared Bud.

Then he got back on the subject.

"Yuh can walk hosses round their range

[*Turn page*]

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till yuh get 'em goin' through the right spot regular. Then yuh catch 'em in a wide wing brush trap—if yuh're lucky. Takes a week sometimes. Mebbe more, maybe less. Depends on the land yuh're in and how much smarter yuh are than the hosses.

"I reckon them first Forty-niners that got their hosses lifted by Injuns and had to catch wild ones was the first Americans on record who walked 'em down. Leastways if there was earlier ones I ain't ever heard of 'em."

Bud paused to let his memory flash back to earlier days.

"There was a runner up in Nebraska by the name of Wild Hoss Jerry got himself quite a rep for runnin' down a wild bunch, alone and afoot. I never done it myself except when I had to. And then I had help along, and the more of it the better I liked it.

"Spring is the best time for walkin' down wild hosses—in case yuh hanker to try it personal. They're havin' their first green grass then and are still kind of weakened from winter privation. When yuh first start a bunch it'll look like they was goin' to run clear out of the country.

"After a couple or so of good sprints and they see nothin' happens they don't run so far or so fast next time yuh come up on 'em. They start figgerin' out a way to double back on the home range, familiar territory.

"That's where yuh got to outsmart 'em. Yuh got to keep 'em movin' and yuh got to have yore trap built where they're shore to go through it. Brush'll camouflage the wide trap wings. Me, I like a trap open at both ends. Yuh can run the wild stuff through once or twice. Nothin' happens and the hosses don't spook at it no more.

"Next time round it's different. Yuh close the back end, chouse 'em in, close the front end of the trap, and yuh got 'em. Leastways yuh have if yuh're quick and handy with a rope. Then yuh can hobble yore catch and leave 'em that way for a day or so while yuh rest before beginnin' the chore o' gettin' 'em back to camp.

"Rightly speakin', runnin' down wild hosses is enough job for a man on a hoss, but like I said they can be walked down, if yuh got to do it. The Injuns were mebbe different. They started afoot and learned to walk 'em down from the beginnin'. Sometimes they kept it up, puttin' the whole tribe on the job.

"They tell of a bunch of Injuns up north, Blackfeet I reckon. They was all caught afoot and walked down new mounts for themselves. I disremember how many Injuns, but they claim that bunch trapped and broke five hundred wild hosses in two weeks. That's fast goin' for any kind of catchin' wild hosses. Must be it's a record.

Distance Lends Enchantment

Abruptly Bud got up. He touched my arm and pointed down the canyon. Near its head, above where the zigzag road scarred the face of the canyon wall about a dozen horses were descending slowly to the canyon floor.

"Wild ones," said Bud.

He stepped to the back of the car. From the plunder piled high on the seat he extracted a battered old pair of binoculars. For a moment he studied the horses far below. Then he handed me the glasses.

At a distance the horses had looked magnificent, but when the glasses brought them closer I could see they were thin and narrow-chested. Yet there was a certain majesty about them, the majesty of freedom and free things everywhere, and of the unconquered.

I handed the glasses back. Bud put them in his car. Then he got in under the wheel beside Ma Young.

"It was kind of nice them bein' here today," he said quietly as if the visitation had been staged for his special benefit. "I caught some fine hosses out of that canyon in my time. There ain't many of us left these days, mustangers or wild hosses neither."

He stepped on the starter and glanced back down the canyon.

"Pore devils," he said. "I hope they make it back to where they come from. Reckon they don't like fences no better'n me."

I must have looked surprised.

"Don't you worry about us none," called out Ma Young as the engine took hold and the Model T rattled and shook. "Bud's always been like that. Beside we got a little payin' gold claim over in the Mogollons. Drop in an' see us if you're ever over that way."

I never was. But sometimes I think I should have gone. Folks like Ma and Bud Young are mighty nice to know.

●

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A Don Diego Vega Story

Suddenly that snaky whip slashed through the air, to cut into the capitán's back

ZORRO STOPS A PANIC

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

With whip and sword, the far-famed Fighting Hidalgo hurls defiance at the brutal Capitan Perez, torturer of peons!

SCREAMS came ringing through the open windows of the little adobe jail building in Reina de Los Angeles—the screams of a man undergoing torture.

Don Diego Vega heard them as he strolled along one side of the plaza, going toward the tavern to get a jar of the crystalized honey the landlord kept as a specialty. Diego's eyes narrowed slightly, but the inscrutable mask of his face did not change in the slightest.

Only a few persons were in sight, though it was after the siesta hour and life should have been stirring. Peons and natives were not hurrying around carrying bundles on their heads. Nor were they loafing half-asleep on the shady sides of the buildings.

Those who were in sight were occupied quite differently.

In the middle of the plaza, far removed from anything that would cast a shade, were four heavy stakes driven firmly into the ground. To each stake, a man was fastened so he could not escape. Chains held the ankles of each man to the stake, and thongs held his wrists. He could only lean against the stakes wearily, and sweat and suffer, not even able to brush aside the stinging flies that tormented him.

Pacing around the stakes were four burly troopers, watching the prisoners and keeping the curious away. They grinned when they heard the screams coming from the jail.

"We shall soon need more stakes," one told the others. "The capitán is getting enthusiastic about his work. A plague on the situation that made us ride down here from Santa Barbara! I do not fancy this pueblo of the angels. The people scowl at us."

"Blame it on that highwayman, Zorro," one of the other troopers replied. "If he had not shot Capitán Ortega in the shoulder, and wounded General Escobar with his blade, our own Capitán would not have been sent here with the detachment."

"Just between the two of us, this Zorro must be quite some man. He dodges around like a shadow. And a wicked fellow with a blade!"

"He is dealing with Capitán Alfredo Perez now," the other reminded him. "Somebody surely knows facts concerning this Zorro. Capitán Perez will beat those facts out of one of these scum. Then he'll nab this Señor Zorro and stretch his neck."

Don Diego heard another series of screams coming from the jail, and a tortured man's wild, shrill cry:

"I can't tell you! I know nothing—know nothing! For the love of the saints!"

DIEGO strolled on, trying to keep an expression of rage out of his face, trying to keep his countenance wooden so that he would not betray his feelings. It was his part at the moment to act like one unconcerned about what happened to luckless peons and natives.

He bent and went through the low, open door of the tavern to the comparative coolness of the semi-dark interior. He blinked to get the sun out of his eyes, and noticed that the fat landlord was the only person in the big main room.

"Ah, Don Diego!" the landlord cooed. "My poor place is honored again. 'Tis more of the crystalized honey you desire? I have put aside several jars for you."

"You appear to have no business," Diego observed.

"At the moment, no. How long this will last, I know not. How it will end, I know not. I have known your illustrious father for years, Don Diego, and I can remember when you were born. I know I may speak my mind freely in the presence of a Vega without danger."

"You may," Diego agreed, as he sat on a bench at the table nearest the counter.

"Since this Capitán Ortega, who was wounded by Zorro and later ordered to Monterey to do some explaining to the Governor, there has been nothing but brutality. The new capitán came with a score of soldiers, as you know, and each one picked because he was a ruffian. Our own Sergeant Manuel Garcia sits on the side and gnaws his nails."

"This is true," Diego observed.

"Capitán Perez began seizing any peon or native it pleased him to seize, without cause whatsoever. He has tortured them, trying to get them to tell him about Zorro—what his real identity is, where he lives and hides and keeps his black horse, with whom he associates."

"So I understand."

"And with what result? The peons and natives are slipping out of the pueblo and taking to the hills, and I for one cannot blame them. This fiend of a Perez is liable to seize any of them. They are in a panic, Don Diego. The warehousemen have no porters or cart drivers. I have no servants here in my tavern. Panic—that's what it is! The business of the pueblo will be wrecked. And this Perez may begin seizing and torturing the house servants next."

"And there troubles will commence piling up against him," Diego observed. "We have been hoping the madman will grow a little calmer. He says that he is master here by order of the Governor, that this is a lawless place and the soldiery must take over. He directs every move the magistrado makes. Get me the jar of honey."

The landlord got the honey. "Where is your body servant, the mute Bernardo?" the landlord asked. "Outside? I'll give him the jar to carry."

"I'll carry the jar myself," Diego told him. "I left Bernardo at home today. If Capitán

Perez had seized and tortured him, I did not wish to be the one to start serious trouble."

"I understand, Don Diego. I regret I have no servant to carry the jar for you. All have run away. This morning not a bronzed son of them was left to do the cleaning. And I cannot blame them. Panic—panic! No man likes to be beaten and tortured, least of all a man innocent of any wrong."

The landlord followed as Diego strolled toward the door, carrying the jar of honey. When they emerged into the sunshine, they saw a small crowd in the plaza around the stakes.

"There is Capitán Perez on his sorrel horse," the landlord whispered. "Some troopers are with him. Now what?"

"I think I'll stroll over and watch and listen," Diego replied.

The landlord remained behind to attend to his establishment. Diego sauntered toward the crowd in the center of the plaza. He could see it was composed of the town's traders mostly, with a sprinkling of grandees who happened to be in town from their ranchos. A few young caballero friends of Diego's were there also.

Capitán Alfredo Perez sat his saddle haughtily, looking down upon those around him. Two mounted troopers were close to him. A couple of others had dismounted and were standing near, holding between them a peon who seemed unable to stand alone, whose back had been cut to ribbons with a whip.

"Unfasten those four species of cattle at the stakes and kick them out of the pueblo," Perez was ordering. "If they return, I'll have them hanged. I'll need the stakes for fresh meat. This unmentionable goes on one of them. I have more in jail."

HIS troopers hurried to do as he ordered. The unfortunates on the stakes were unshackled and fell sprawling to earth, too weak to stand. A trooper kicked one. And then gray-headed old Fray Felipe, the Franciscan attached to the chapel, had thrust his way through the crowd. His emaciated form seemed to be quivering with rage beneath his robe, and his eyes were blazing.

"For shame!" Fray Felipe cried. "These men have suffered enough, and for nothing. I'll have them carried to the chapel, give them water and food and let them gather strength before they depart."

"Are you giving orders here, fray?" Perez howled. "I represent His Excellency, the Governor!"

"And I represent One higher than His Excellency, señor, and make certain demands in the name of mercy."

"Have your way. Let somebody carry the scum out of my sight. And you, fray, do not try me too far, or your robe may not protect you. There have been several hints that perhaps some of you robed Franciscans of the missions know a deal about this scoundrel Zorro, that you protect him, and aid and abet him in his work. That is treason, fray."

"If it is treason to give aid to innocent men who have been tortured for naught, then I am a traitor. They told you they knew nothing of Zorro, yet you beat them."

"Do you think I would take the word of such scum? The truth must be beaten out of them. Have them taken away."

Fray Felipe gestured, and some men standing near aided those who had been lashed to the stakes, and started getting them away. The man who had been brought from the jail was fastened to one of the stakes, moaning and weeping. The traders and others crowded nearer, and one spoke.

"Capitán Perez!" he called. "Your business is your own, and we do not intend to interfere with it. But there is a thing perhaps you do not realize."

"What is that, señor?"

"You have seized and tortured natives and peons, and it has frightened the others. They have run away. We have nobody to do the work. Our porters and cart drivers, the men who clean our places—all have run off. You will paralyze the life of the community, Capitán Perez."

"I'll paralyze the whole district if necessary to get at the truth about this Zorro! I was sent here to catch him, and I'll do it! He is not dealing with a weakling now. You will take notice that he has made no appearance since I came among you."

"But our businesses?"

"Your peons and natives will come back and go to work in time. No doubt they welcome an excuse to get away into the hills for a few days. I have not touched any of the house servants—so far. I will do that next, if it is necessary."

"We do not doubt your authority to question the men, capitán. But you beat and torture them to get information they may not have."

"I think I have had about enough of such

talk!" Perez roared. "You are growing insolent and trying to tell me my business. I have enough tough troopers with me to handle any rebellious element in town, regardless of their social status. To get at the truth I will investigate everybody—traders, dealers, caballeros, grandees, even robed Franciscans! Two peons I wanted escaped my men and ran way to Mission San Gabriel. There they sit now, ready to dodge into the mission chapel and claim sanctuary if they see me coming. I am going after them tomorrow, and I'll get them and bring them back tied to saddles at the end of ropes—and it will be their hard luck if the horses put on speed and the scoundrels fall and are dragged over the rough ground. One side, now! I return to the barracks!"

As the small crowd started to break up, Diego sauntered away and went toward his father's house, carrying the pot of honey.

This sort of thing had to stop, he told himself. The panic must be brought to an end. Capitán Perez was running away with himself, exceeding his authority and using the excuse of duty as a reason for senseless cruelties.

When he reached home, he found his father, dignified, grizzled Don Alejandro Vega, in the patio, and sat beside him on a bench near the fountain. In low tones, Diego related what he had seen and heard, and reported the state of affairs in the pueblo generally.

"It must be stopped—and Zorro is the only one who can stop it," Diego concluded. "I heard that one man Perez tortured died afterward. He is a blood-thirsty fiend if ever I saw one. One would think the days of the Inquisition were with us again."

"I suppose some action must be taken," Don Alejandro said. "But sometimes I fear that Zorro will meet with tragedy."

"Never fear, my father. With a cause as just as this he cannot fail."

"What would you do, my son?"

"The fiend is going to San Gabriel tomorrow to catch two poor fellows. Undoubtedly he will spend the night there. With your permission, my father, I'll drive to San Gabriel this afternoon late in the carriage, and go to our rancho."

"I'll go with you, my son, for there are some things at the rancho I must investigate. And it will make the affair look better, as if there was a legitimate reason for you going. I'll give orders at once to have the carriage made ready."

"I'll have Bernardo take my black horse and Zorro's attire and weapons to the rancho during the night," Diego said.

DIEGO carried the honey into the kitchen, then went to his own room to pack a few things to take with him to the rancho.

He had decided he would not get word to old Fray Felipe of the intended journey and its purpose.

The fray, Diego's father, and Bernardo, his faithful mute peon body servant, were the only human beings who knew that Don Diego Vega, generally regarded as a spineless disgrace to his family name, was in reality Zorro, the terror of evil-doers. This affair might result in a slaying, for Capitán Perez was a noted swordsman. And Diego did not want to see Fray Felipe before he started out.

He stretched out on the couch in his room to rest and think and plan. This new capitán would not be an easy man to reach under favorable circumstances, so the affair could be an even one. Perez kept himself surrounded by his burly troopers, and undoubtedly a spirit of fairness was not in him. His passion was to get Zorro and win the approval of the Governor, and he would use any methods to do so.

With his father, Diego drove to the rancho not far from Mission San Gabriel. It was after dark when they arrived. Diego had food and drink with his father, and retired early. Before he fell asleep, he did more planning, trying to foresee every possibility. It was not an easy task, for he did not know what Capitán Perez might do, was not certain of the enemy's moves.

When Diego emerged from his room the following morning, he found Bernardo stretched on a pallet outside the door, asleep and snoring gently. Bernardo grinned and sprang to his feet when Diego toed him awake.

"You got through safely and brought everything?" Diego asked.

Bernardo nodded assent.

"The black horse is in the far pasture where he will not be seen?"

Bernardo nodded again.

"Bueno! Rest as much as you can today, Bernardo. Go to the kitchen and get all you want to eat. I am going to drive to the mission just before the siesta hour and learn

how things are. I won't need you until this evening."

Bernardo bobbed his head again, yawned, and hurried away toward the kitchen. Diego went to join his father for the morning meal.

"You have plans, my son?" Don Alejandro asked, when they were alone at the table.

"I am unable to make plans. I do not know what the other man will do. I am hoping he stays the night. Until I know where he will lodge, I can do nothing."

"There will always be some of his troopers around him."

"He may be well guarded, but I'll get at him! The things he is doing—there must be an end. Natives and peons will become frightened and commence deserting the ranchos next. Small wonder they are in a panic."

"Is there anything I can do to help, my son?"

"I thought I'd drive to the mission late this morning. If you went along, everybody would think we were merly paying our respects to the padres."

"I'll go with you gladly, Diego. I want to chat with the padres. I have been neglecting them lately."

Shortly before the noon hour, they got into the carriage and were driven to the mission. The arrival of Don Alejandro and his son created a stir. The Vegas were pious and generous, and the padres admired and respected them. They were ushered into the guest house, food and drink were brought, and the padres chatted and made them welcome.

Siesta hour came, and they were left alone to stretch on couches in the guest house and take the mid-day nap. But Diego arose from his couch the moment they were alone, and went to one of the little barred windows to watch. He could see across the mission compound to the main gate. A few natives and peons were dozing in the shade. Those of the mission rested. There was scarcely any human activity.

Suddenly the thunder of galloping hoofs came up the highway. Through the gate of the compound swept Capitán Alfredo Perez with six troopers behind him. They skidded their mounts to a stop amid showers of dust and gravel. Perez barked an order, and the troopers sprang out of their saddles.

The peons slumbering around the compound had been shocked to alertness by the sudden arrival of the troopers. Before they could run, they found the soldiers at them, threatening them with weapons.

"Round up all the scum!" Perez shouted. "We'll look them over afterward. I know the men I want."

Screeching natives were seized and herded against the compound wall. Peons who emerged sleepily from the warehouse and sheds were given the same treatment. Because they did not understand what this meant, they began howling their fears. The sleeping mission was aroused.

Diego watched it all through the window. He felt a touch on his arm, and turned to find that his father had left the couch and was standing beside him.

"They have come," Diego whispered. "Perez has begun his work."

"He dare not use violence in the mission compound."

"Such a man has no respect for anything," Diego declared.

FROM the chapel emerged the senior padre of the mission, to stride across the compound toward the scene of the disorder, his gown flapping around his legs in the breeze.

Still mounted, Perez wheeled his horse and watched the padre approach.

"What is the meaning of this tumult, señor?" the padre demanded.

"Do you question the authority of His Excellency's soldiery?"

"I merely asked the meaning of the tumult."

"And you shall have an answer, padre. I seek two peons and one native for questioning regarding this notorious senor Zorro. They got away from Reina de los Angeles and came here, as I happen to know."

"Are any of them in the group against the wall?"

"None. But I may take some of these men to Reina de los Angeles for questioning."

"I have heard of your methods, senor, and do not approve of them," the padre said. "Those men against the wall—they all work for the mission. I know them all and will vouch for them."

Perez laughed raucously. "Do you think, padre, that you know everything about them? Their secret acts and thoughts? Would you know, for instance, if they were aiding this Zorro? Would they tell you? Or would you know and perhaps keep it all a secret?"

"You are growing insulting, senor. These

men are blameless. I ask you to release them immediately."

"I'll take them outside your confounded compound, where you have no authority, padre, and I have, and ask them a few gentle questions there. If I grow suspicious of any, he goes back to Reina de los Angeles and to jail. And I remain here and search until I have the men I want. I request the hospitality of your guest house."

"This is denied to none," the padre replied, softly. "You may stable your horses when you will, and your men may sleep in the shed beside the warehouse."

Perez narrowed his eyes. "Not all my men sleep at the same time, padre," he replied. "It will be well if everyone understands that."

He shouted another order, and his troopers herded the prisoners through the gate and took them a short distance away. Perez rode after them. Soon the crack of a whip could be heard, and shrieks and howls. Perez had started his work.

The peons and natives who had not been caught went into quick hiding and remained there shaking. Diego went to another window of the guest house and looked out. He could see a stretch of the highway and beyond it, where Perez had stopped his men and the prisoners near some stunted trees.

"He is at work, my father," Diego said.

Don Alejandro's eyes were blazing. "He is a fit subject for Zorro's wit and weapons. He deserves the punishment he can be given."

"You heard him say he would spend the night in the guest house."

"But you cannot resort to violence, fight and possibly mortally wound a man in this holy place, my son."

"That is true. So he must be taken outside. Now, my father, I can commence making my plans."

At sunset, the Vegas left the mission for the drive to the rancho. Perez' troopers had beaten four men rather badly, and the padres had carried them into the mission for treatment. More peons and natives had been rounded up and inspected, and Perez was raging because he had not found the men he wanted. He even peered into the chapel to see if they had taken sanctuary there.

He finally went to the guest house, where a padre with an inscrutable face attended him. The men camped just outside the compound gate and made their evening meal, then stabled their horses and went to the shed where they were to sleep. One took up guard duty in front of the door of the guest house.

The padres protested. A military guard had no business on duty at the mission guest house, they pointed out. But Perez gave the order, and the guard remained.

Diego and his father were silent as they drove to the rancho, though the driver was a trusted man. It might be perilous if another human being learned the identity of Zorro. Under torture, men will reveal much. Diego was safe so far. His father and old Fray Felipe would keep his secret. Loyal Bernardo could not talk, and would have died before betraying Diego if he could have spoken.

They had the evening meal, then Diego strolled through the patio of the house, went beneath an arch, and stood there watching the huts of the house servants. It was night already, but a bright moon swam in the sky. Bernardo slipped through the shadows and stopped beside him.

"Zorro rides tonight," Diego whispered. "Have everything ready in about two hours. I'll meet you by the feed shed beyond the sheep pens."

Bernardo melted away into the moonlit night.

An hour later, Diego and his father pretended to retire. Don Alejandro went with his son to his room, embraced him, slapped him upon the back.

"Use great care," he cautioned. "Nothing must happen to Zorro."

"I will be cautious, my father."

"If I were young, and could ride with you on such a mission!"

"Your intention rides with me," Diego said.

ANOTHER hour passed. The house grew quiet. The singing down by the huts ended. The fires beneath the cooking pots died down, and those of the rancho slept.

Diego slipped out of the house and kept to the shadows as he crossed the patio. Nobody was moving around the huts. But he continued to keep to the shadows as he made his way to the sheep pens and to the adobe shed beyond them.

One side of the long shed cast a dark shadow, and there Bernardo was waiting with the black horse and the clothes and weapons of Zorro. Diego dressed swiftly, buckled on his blade, thrust his charged

pistol into his sash, and hooked a curling whip into the left side of his belt where it would not interfere if he sought to draw his sword.

He instructed Bernardo in whispers:

"Remain here until I return. I do not knew when that will be. What I have to do—I may have to wait for the proper opportunity. I will not ride this way if pursued, until I can throw off the pursuit. Be ready to jump into the saddle when I leave it, and ride the horse to the far pasture. Rub him down there after you have removed the gear, so there will be no hot and wet horse to attract attention if the soldiers should come this way. It is all understood?"

Bernardo made a guttural sound which meant assent.

Zorro mounted, made himself comfortable in the saddle, and rode away cautiously through the night. He had ample time for the journey. So he kept off the road, sought out dark streaks, rode in depressions when he could.

In the rôle of Zorro, he was a different man entirely. He was all fire and spirit now, a man any young caballero would have envied, not the spineless fop he had led people to believe him to be because that suited his purpose.

He stopped the powerful black at times and rested him. Zorro did not want to reach the mission too early. He wanted to find Capitán Alfredo Perez fogged with sleep instead of alert, for the first few minutes might be perilous. And the same thing went for the guard.

Across the highway from the mission gate, and perhaps a hundred yards away, was a small grove of trees. Zorro finally reached it, dismounted, and tied the horse so a quick jerk on the rein would release him. He adjusted his belt and sash, saw that his weapons were in proper position, and started for the gate.

Nobody was passing on the highway, and it was quiet around the mission. Zorro listened at the gate, then unfastened it and pulled it open slowly. The high wall cut off the light of the moon on this side of the compound at that hour. From the darkness, Zorro surveyed the scene.

None of the troopers' horses were saddled and ready, for which Zorro was thankful. A pursuit would be slow in starting. All the troopers seemed to be sleeping except the one guard, and he was squatting before a tiny fire in front of the guest house, a wine jug beside him.

Zorro went along the dark streak next to the wall, careful that his boots did not crunch gravel. From his belt he took a short length of woven rope and made a loop with it. He was within a few feet of the half-asleep guard when the man started to stand.

Like a panther, Zorro was upon his back, had the loop around the man's throat, and was jerking it tight, choking the trooper. The fellow tried to fight, groaned once, then collapsed. Zorro pulled him back into the darkness against the wall.

Working swiftly, he bound the man's ankles with another piece of rope, then fastened his hands behind him. He gagged the trooper with a short length of his own neck scarf. Rolling the man back against the wall, Zorro went on toward the guest house.

The guest house door was never locked, as Zorro knew. He got through it silently, and found himself in the main room, where a taper burned on a table. He could hear Capitán Perez snoring in one of the small sleeping rooms.

His actions were swift now. He took his pistol from his sash and held it ready, picked up the taper, went to the door of the room in which Perez was sleeping, and gently opened the door.

Perez was stretched on his back, his mouth open, dead asleep. Zorro closed the door, put the taper down upon a table, and advanced to the couch, holding the pistol menacingly.

He touched Perez on the shoulder, then shook him. Perez broke off a snore, gulped, opened his eyes. He saw a man dressed in black and wearing a black mask standing a few feet from the couch holding a pistol ready.

"Careful!" Zorro warned. "At the first sound from you, I shoot to kill, beater of helpless men!"

"Who are you?" Perez whispered, his eyes bulging. "How did you come in here?"

"I am Zorro. And I simply walked in. Your guards are not very watchful, Senor el Capitán!"

COMPREHENSION dawned on Perez. He tossed aside covers and sat on the edge of the couch. Save that his coat and boots were off, he was fully dressed.

"Zorro!" he exclaimed.

"Careful! Be silent, or I shoot to kill! Dress quickly, put on your sword, and come with

me. Ask no questions. Call out, make a violent move, and it will be your last."

Capitán Alfredo Perez was no coward, but had sensè enough to know when fight was futile. He dressed swiftly, completely, buckled on his blade, put on his sombrero.

"Come," Zorro ordered. "Hold your hands clasped behind your back. If I see them unclasp, I shoot. The muzzle of my pistol will rest against the base of your spine all the way. Make a wrong move, senor, and I'll blow you in two!"

In such fashion, he took Perez from the guest house and got him to the dark streak against the compound wall. Step by step, he drove him toward the gate, whispering caution against Perez crunching gravel purposely with his boots. Through the gate they went, the muzzle of the pistol still pressing against Perez' back, across the highway, and toward the grove of trees.

In a cleared space flooded with the light of the bright full moon, Zorro stopped his prisoner and faced him.

"You are a fiend, senor," Zorro said. "You torture helpless men, trying to get information I swear to you they cannot give. None of them know anything about me."

"So you have brought me here to kill me?" Perez asked in a low tense voice.

"I am not a murderer, senor. I have brought you here to punish you, and then to fight you if you so desire."

Perez' eyes gleamed in the moonlight. "Put away your pistol then, and let us draw blades and fight. You have made a bad move tonight, Senor Zorro. This adventure will be your last."

"The fighting will come later, if you have a stomach for it," Zorro told him. "The punishment comes first."

He transferred his pistol to his left hand. And suddenly that snaky cutting whip was in his right hand, and slashed through the air to cut into the capitán's back. Perez growled a curse and started forward with a rush. But the lash always met him, drove him back or to either side. It wrapped around his body and brought blood, cut into his back often. Perez tried to get his blade out of its scabbard, and finally succeeded. But the lash hit his wrist and snaked the blade out of his hand and hurled it to the ground.

Perez, cursing and starting to howl, started to rush again. Zorro drove him back once more, but did not follow him this time. He hooked the whip quickly to his belt.

"Now, senor, we can fight," he said. "Pick up your sword, and tell me when you feel able."

"I am able now," Perez said. "I'll kill you for this!"

"You have tasted the whip you have had put across the back of many helpless men," Zorro replied. "Officers like you are not wanted in this part of Alta California."

Perez darted aside, whipped up his blade from the ground, and charged. Zorro met the rush with his own weapon, and they began circling. This would be a deadly thing, Zorro knew. The man had been whipped, and his pride and dignity outraged. Well, he knew now how it felt to be whipped!

Perez' mad rush drove Zorro aside, then they engaged again. Perez knew how to handle a blade. But his boiling rage was conquering him as much as Zorro's swordmanship. The avenger was as cold as ice, fighting cautiously, making a grim business of it.

Zorro had no wish to kill, but he sought to give a serious injury. He felt Perez commencing to weaken. Then Perez began fighting off his rage and giving more attention to his skill.

"You are done in this locality, senor," Zorro said, as they fought. "Perhaps you are done altogether. You are a fiend in human form, senor. One man died from the beatings your men gave him by your orders, and he was innocent of all wrong."

"Save your breath for fighting," Perez gasped.

Perez noticed that Zorro had returned his pistol to his sash. He began talking louder, almost shouting, trying to attract attention as they fought, hoping his troopers would hear. Zorro guessed his purpose, and laughed.

"It is too late for that, senor," Zorro said. "I can finish you when I will."

Perez knew it, felt it. But he made another mad rush, trying to bear down Zorro with its mere violence. Zorro laughed mockingly and let him charge past.

"Help!" Perez bellowed suddenly. "To me, troopers!"

"Coward!" Zorro snapped at him.

"You are—an outlaw! I am an officer! It is not cowardice."

PEREZ had been heard. But before that, the troopers were all awake and knew something was wrong. One had gone to relieve the guard at the guest house, and had

found him bound and gagged. He had darted into the guest house to find Capitán Perez missing, and had hurried to arouse the others. They had dressed swiftly.

Then they had heard Perez' shout for help before they started to saddle their horses, and had hurried to the gate and thrown it open. In the bright moonlight, they could see Perez fighting, could hear the ringing blades.

"Help!" Perez called in a last desperate effort. "Zorro is here!"

The troopers howled and charged across the highway, whipping their swords out, feeling for their pistols.

Zorro saw them coming and knew it was time to end this thing. He pressed the fighting, engaged Perez furiously, drove him back. His blade darted in and came back crimson, and Capitán Perez sprawled on the ground.

The troopers were charging on, but their pace was not swift because of their heavy, cumbersome cavalry boots. Zorro slapped his blade into its scabbard, jerked out his pistol, and started running for the grove of trees where he had left his horse.

Guns exploded behind him, but no bullet came near. He stopped an instant and discharged his own pistol as a warning, then ran on. Before more shots came, he was in the darkness of the grove, had jerked the horse free and was in the saddle. An instant he hesitated, watching the troopers charging at him through the moonlight. Then he used his spurs.

More pistol balls came, to miss the flying target, a poor target in that mixture of moonlight and shadow.

Then the black's hoofs were thundering, and Zorro was away.

He circled, cut back to the road, got to the shed behind the sheep pens, turned the horse over to the waiting Bernardo, stripped off Zorro's costume and weapons, and was Don Diego Vega again.

"Rub the horse down well, and be careful," he warned in whispers.

Then he made his way carefully to the house and let himself in.

As he was undressing, his father entered.

"It is done, my son?" he asked.

"I whipped the fiend, then we fought. I gave him a bad wound, but he will recover, I think. But he will not be able to assume his fiendish duties for a long time to come."

"I am glad, my son. I was somewhat worried about the matter."

"Worry ages one," Diego observed. "Now, I need a good sleep."

Don Diego Vega pits himself against the brutal power of Jose Gonzales, evil rancher whose misdeeds call for swift vengeance

IN

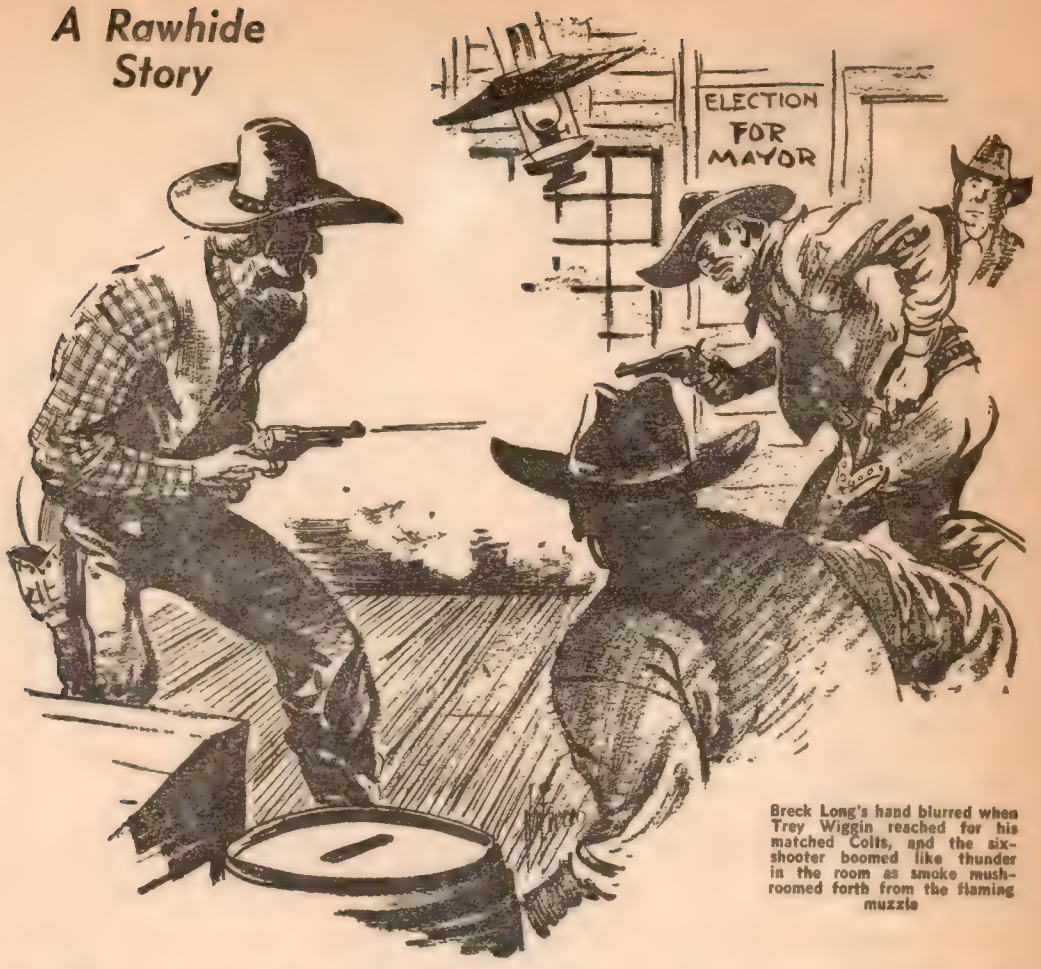
ZORRO'S TWIN PERILS

Another Story of the Masked Avenger

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

Next Month

A Rawhide Story



Breck Long's hand blurred when Trey Wiggin reached for his matched Colts, and the six-shooter boomed like thunder in the room as smoke mushroomed forth from the flaming muzzle

THE MAYOR OF RAWHIDE

By TOM PARSONS

Lem Adams and Reverend Carter join in a gunsmoke showdown with "railroad ender" Obed Meyers and killer Trey Wiggin!

WHEN Obed Meyers bought a piece of property fronting the Pinto Road at the edge of town, no one realized that profound changes would come to Rawhide because of it. Obed himself said nothing except that he was starting a business, and he was gone so quickly after the purchase that nobody had much of a chance to question him.

Lem Adams had a few slight qualms that the newcomer might be establishing another General Store. The Reverend Carter and even young Doc Renford joshed Lem about it.

"Don't yuh worry none about me," Lem grinned and raked his thick fingers through his mass of white hair. "This Obed Meyers gent will have himself an augerment before it's through. He'll try to grab off all the business at first, then he'll learn it can't be

done. After that we'll get along fine."

So Lem Adams stood under the shade of his canopied porch the morning the freight wagons brought in materials for the new building. As the wagons wheeled onto the stretch of sage where the new store was to go, two men detached themselves. They came striding down the street, heading directly for Lem's place.

One was small and thin, dressed in a long black coat and black trousers that were stuffed into finely tooled boots. A gunbelt circled his waist beneath the coat and a gold watch chain flashed across a flowery vest. Lem's gray eyes narrowed and his wrinkled face set in a disapproving look.

"Blamed funny get-up for a grocer," he muttered.

The second man was tall and beefy, wearing a battered, broad-brimmed hat that shaded a harsh, angular face. Lem didn't need the sight of the crossed belts to read the sign of the gunslinger. That showed in the thin, set lips, the cold, steady look of the pinched black eyes and the cruel flare of the high-ridged nose. The men came up on the porch.

"Howdy," the smaller of the two said. "Yuh'd be Lem Adams, I reckon." He spoke with a twist of his lips. His face was an unhealthy white, reddened now by the sun. Shifty blue eyes framed a long, pointed nose. His hands grasped the lapels of his coat.

"I'm Obed Meyers," he said. "This is my segundo, Trey Wiggin. Me'n Trey figured yuh could arrange to supply us while we're buildin' my saloon. Might be yuh could tell us where we could stay."

"Saloon!" Lem exclaimed, staring. Meyers shuffled his feet.

"Sure. I been followin' end-of-track up north as the railroad builds to Pinto. That job's about over and I got to find me a place to set up in business permanent." He glanced over his shoulder at Dent Sturgis' New Deck. "Yuh only got one saloon and an old maid to run it. I figger the miners and cowboys in these parts want real excitement. My Lucky Gal will give it to 'em."

LEM caught his breath and his grizzled brows drew down. "Look, friend," he said. "Yuh can build yore saloon, but there's a heap yuh got to learn about Rawhide. We're peaceful and we aim to keep that way."

"Heard about yuh." Obed turned and grinned at Trey Wiggin. "Yuh needn't worry none about peace. The local boys will be pure wooly lambs in my place."

Lem took the men inside the store where Meyers bought a large amount of nails, hardware and equipment. "Trey" Wiggin made arrangements for one of the freighters to pick up the goods.

Lem watched them walk back to the wagons. He frowned, his eyes turning to the New Deck and back to Obed Meyers. Dent ran a saloon in such a way that there was never any trouble. Lem tugged at his ear lobe and turned back into his store.

As time passed, the new saloon took shape under the hammers and saws of the carpenters. Obed Meyers came to the store a few times for supplies and after each visit, Lem felt a little more worried. Trey and Obed both suggested tinhorns and dancehall girls, and Lem didn't like the end-of-track stories that Obed told.

At last, Lem decided that it was time Obed Meyers learned what Rawhide expected in a saloon. Obed and his gunhawk stood at the counter that morning while Doc Renford sat hunched in his chair, feet cocked on the cold stove. The sale completed, Lem cleared his throat.

"Obed, yuh'll be openin' yore place pretty soon. I don't know what yore plans are, but I reckon yuh'd better know how Rawhide figgers."

"I know," Obed cut in with a smile. His eyes narrowed and his fingers gripped his coat lapels a little more tightly. "I been hearin' a heap about Rawhide. Seems like it all simmers down to yore ideas, Lem."

"Rawhide has always thought like I do," Lem said. "But I never figgered I run the town. Take Dent over across the street. He don't allow no tinhorns to light in the New Deck. He don't let the stakes at his tables get very high and so there's no trouble. I reckon yore Lucky Gal will be run the same?"

"I run the Lucky Gal the way I decide," Obed snapped. He leaned forward against the counter. "Get this, Adams! Yuh can mind yore own business so far as I'm concerned. If cowboys and miners from the diggin's want steep games, they can have 'em. If they want cheap liquor, I'll have it to sell. I'm bringin' a girl or two from Pinto."

"Rawhide won't stand for it," Lem said. Renford had left his chair and stood tense, waiting by the stove. Obed laughed and pointed to Trey Wiggin.

"Then I reckon Trey will do a little edu-

catin' in these parts." He sobered and his face grew mean. "Normal, I go my way leavin' other gents alone. But I don't take to folks with long noses. Neither does Trey. Yuh think that over, Adams, and I reckon there won't never be trouble between us."

He turned on his heel and walked out of the door. Lem leaned on the counter, his eyes cold, his face looking as if it had been carved from granite. Doc Renford moved slowly away from the stove.

"Trouble, Lem, and plenty of it."

Lem jerked himself erect. "I've seen trouble before and I'm still here kickin'. Right now, there's nothin' anyone can do. Meyers ain't opened his saloon and he ain't brought in any toughs or tinhorns."

"But he will," Doc warned. Lem nodded, his full lips pressing together in a determined line.

"He will," Lem said. "When he does, Meyers is going to find he's got a heap of trouble on his hands."

"Don't know," Doc said uncertainly. "Heard he's handled those wild Irish tracklayers when they were drunk or belligerent. Most of them are just over from the old country, a wild lot with a punch like dynamite in their fists."

Word got around, as it does in a small place like Rawhide, that Obed Meyers had challenged Lem Adams to stop him from breaking the peace. Reverend Carter heard of it and was troubled. The young preacher was a direct man so he did not delay going to the new saloon. It was almost finished and the furniture would arrive in a day or two. Carter threaded his way over the littered, canopied porch and entered the doorway where the batwings were not yet hung.

Obed Meyers and Trey Wiggin stood at the back of the long room, but they came forward as Carter approached. They eyed him suspiciously, though Carter smiled and extended his hand. Obed reluctantly accepted it. They looked on enigmatically and nodded very briefly to Carter's greeting.

"I'm Douglas Carter, the preacher of Rawhide." Instantly Obed's eyes narrowed and Trey gave his boss a swift sidelong glance.

"No parsons wanted here," Obed said shortly.

CARTER'S smile weakened a trifle but his voice remained friendly.

"I assure you that I shan't interfere with your business so long as it is run correctly. I can see neither of you gentlemen understand Rawhide and the way it thinks. For instance, Lem Adams always does what is best for the town and we know it. He was the first man to have a business in this district and we all respect him."

"Listen, Sky Pilot," Obed snapped. "Yuh're trying to tell me how to run my business and myself. I don't take that from no one. Trey! You need some exercise."

Trey grinned and hitched up his gunbelt. Suddenly his arms shot out and his fingers fastened on Carter's coat front. He jerked the preacher toward him and spun him half around, grabbing the seat of his trousers. Carter tried to break free but Trey was a powerful man, his grip too strong.

Carter felt himself rushed across the floor, out the front door and across the porch. The carpenters stared, round-eyed. At the edge of the porch, Trey gave a final heave and Carter sailed into the street. He landed in the dust with a bone-shaking thud that dazed him for a moment. He heard an angry roar from somewhere, but the voice didn't register for a moment.

He felt himself picked up and Peg Strickland's homely, angry face gradually formed itself in the fog that surrounded the Reverend Carter.

"No," he answered Peg's sharp question. "I'm not hurt."

"If he thinks he can manhandle gents, he's got something to learn," Peg snapped. His hand dropped to his holster and he turned to the porch where Trey unconcernedly watched.

The gunhawk's eyes centered on Peg and he straightened, hands dropping down to his matched guns. Something cold and predatory came into his face and his eyes lighted like a hawk's at the sight of a prey. Peg advanced, freckled face set, a slight crouch to his stride. Carter's brain cleared and he realized what was happening.

"No, Peg!" he cried. "Wait!" He jumped forward and stepped between Peg and the silent, waiting gunhawk on the porch. Obed Meyers stood in the doorway, watching.

"Let me alone, Reverend," Peg snapped. "I aim to get me a scalp."

"You're not!" Carter snapped. "He'll kill you, Peg."

He pushed the tall teamster back, keeping his body between Peg and the gunhawk. Peg tried to protest but Carter overrode him. At last Peg reluctantly conceded defeat.

He glowered up at Trey.

"Maybe not this time," he called. "But keep yore hands off Rawhide folks if yuh want to stay above ground."

"Yuh got me shakin' in my boots," Trey answered with a taunting grin. "Yuh and the whole blasted town sure worry me."

Peg stiffened and Carter had to use main force to drag him away to the security of Lem Adams' store. It took almost a solid hour of argument on the Reverend Carter's part to soothe Peg Strickland and keep Lem from calling a showdown there and then. But at last it was done.

For a time, at least, there'd be no trouble in Rawhide. The days passed and Lem watched the Lucky Gal completed, the bar moved in, the cases of liquor, the gaming equipment, chairs, the brass spittoons unloaded and placed to Obed's directions. The building itself was a two story affair, the upper floor given to private gaming rooms, Obed's office, and dressing rooms for such entertainers that he might have.

The first of the tinhorns arrived soon after and found that no one in Rawhide would rent them rooms. Obed swore and threatened but finally made over the gaming cubicles into living quarters. Two girls came from Pinto and the Lucky Gal was ready to open.

Lem Adams, Doc Renford, Reverend Carter and the citizens of Rawhide held several informal councils but they came to nothing. The Lucky Gal opened on a Saturday morning, when the cowboys flocked in from the ranches and the miners from the Doglas Diggings. Obed, wisely, advertised the first drink free to each customer. The dancehall girls and the tinhorns did the rest.

By nightfall there had been two fights between drunken miners and several cowboys had been stripped of their month's wages, riding back to their spread, broke, drunk and belligerent. The New Deck did only a small business to those who took their relaxation wisely. Late that night Dent Sturgis came over to Lem's store, joining the serious gathering around the stove.

"Not enough business to pay for the lamps," he grunted wryly as he pulled up a soap box and sat down. "A heap of fools sure want to get poisoned and robbed, seems like."

LEM nodded dourly. "What are we goin' to do about it?"

"Run that gunhawk and his boss out of Rawhide," Peg cut in. "I'll sure volunteer for the job."

Lem Adams shook his head. "Can't. I reckon he's got a right here in Rawhide like the rest of us, though we don't approve none of what he does. If we get him out of town, it has to be done legal. I won't have it no other way."

Breck Long, the gunsmith, frowned at one of the overhead lamps.

"I reckon I've met a dozen men of his breed," he said. "They don't savvy much more than gunsmoke."

The men twisted around as the screen door banged open. Obed Meyers and Trey Wiggin came in. They stopped short when they saw the group around the stove. Obed shrugged slightly and came down the aisle. He glanced around the ring of faces.

"Looks like yuh gents has been having an augerment—mebbe about the Lucky Gal."

Lem met his shifting glance with a level stare. "Yuh named it, Meyers. We don't like what yuh're bringing to Rawhide."

"Aim to do somethin' about it?" Obed asked. Lem slowly nodded and waved his hand toward his friends.

"I reckon there's enough of us to figger something out."

Obed laughed and leaned back against the counter, his narrowed eyes moving from Lem to Doc, to Reverend Carter and all around the ring of stern, hard faces. His own smile faded and a muscle jumped in his cheek. He straightened and his voice was contemptuous.

"Listen, hombres, I do as I please in Rawhide. Maybe the rest of yuh jump when Adams cracks the whip, but I ain't seen no sign of his authority. Yuh ain't even a town, legally. Yuh ain't got a deputy or a marshal. There ain't no special laws for Rawhide, except those of the Territory and I ain't breakin' none of them."

"Meaning?" Lem asked coldly.

"Meaning yuh ain't got a law that'll close my place up or drive me out of town. Touch my place or try drivin' me out and I'll have the lot of yuh in jail at Pinto, the county seat."

"There's other ways," Breck Long quietly suggested. Obed whirled to face him, fairly spitting his words.

"Yuh reckon I hadn't figured on that?" he demanded. "I can match any gunsmoke yuh want to start. Trey's as good as any gunslinger in the county and I can get more where he come from."

"Trey's just good until a better comes along," Breck said easily. The gunhawk stiffened and he sharply eyed Breck. Lem made a quick, negative gesture with his hand.

"None of that, Breck. Meyers, while yuh're shippin' in yore rotgut liquor, yuh'd better bring in everythin' else yuh need. Yuh won't buy nothin' in Rawhide. Savvy?"

"That way, huh?" Obed raised his brows and smiled. "Well, see how long that does yuh any good."

He stalked out, Trey following him. At the door the gunhawk checked, half turned. His eyes swept slowly over Breck from head to toe, calculating, judging. He said nothing but turned at last and quietly left the store.

Silence held the group around the stove for a few moments and then they burst out in an angry torrent of words. The Reverend Carter did not join them. He sat with his long legs crossed, pinching his chin, staring unseeingly at the rough floor boards. The rest of the men harangued one another, suggesting ideas that were instantly discarded.

Suddenly Carter snapped his fingers and jerked erect.

"Got it!" he said exultantly and every eye centered on him. "Our friend who just left gave us the answer."

"What do yuh mean?" Dent demanded.

Carter laughed. "Rawhide's not a town," he said, "and there are no special laws for Rawhide. It hasn't a deputy or a marshal so Obed Meyers operates as he pleases. Now how do you change that?"

They stared at him, frankly puzzled. Lem scratched his white thatch.

"Why, I dunno exact," Lem said. "Of course a town like Pinto that's bigger'n ours has all them things."

"How did Pinto get them?" Carter demanded eagerly. "It petitioned the Territorial Legislature to incorporate as a town. That was granted and it held an election for its first mayor and town council. The council passed ordinances for Pinto and the mayor and the marshal saw they were carried out."

"That's it!" Doc Renford slapped his knee.

"Rawhide—with a mayor?" Lem asked. He thought it over and his eyes lighted when he saw the possibilities. "Gadfry, Carter! Yuh sure blazed the trail. We could law Obed Meyers and the Lucky Gal right out of Rawhide plumb legal."

"I'll draw up the petition. Lem, reckon yuh could get all the folks in Rawhide to sign her?"

"They'll sign," Lem nodded.

THE Reverend Carter spent two days wording and shaping the petition. He left it at Lem's store and slowly the signatures trailed down below the formal petition. Those who did not come to the store were corralled by Peg Strickland or Mary, Doc Renford's wife. At last every person within Rawhide had signed.

In writing the petition, Carter had come upon two knotty problems that informal conferences before Lem Adams' big stove solved. It was decided that the boundaries of Rawhide should extend one half mile in every direction beyond the outermost houses.

"That way, we can give Rawhide room to grow," Lem argued. "Ain't no use cramping ourselves up right from the beginning."

That was easily agreed upon and placed in the petition, but the matter of establishment of residence was not so easily solved. Some felt that those who had first come and settled should be counted as the legal residents. But that cut out such newcomers as Dent Sturgis, Doc Renford, Reverend Carter and Breck Long, good men who should be allowed to vote. The argument went on for hours and at last Lem Adams slapped his hand down on his littered roll-top desk.

"Rawhide ain't legal in existence. Won't be until the Territory grants this petition. All right, then right now there ain't a resident in the whole blasted town. It ain't born yet."

"But yuh have to decide some way," Dent objected.

"Yuh can, easy. Every hombre who lives in this place on the date the Territory sets for our first election is a resident. That way yuh can be fair to everyone."

"That lets Obed Meyers and his tinhorns vote," Carter objected.

"Sure," Lem grinned. "So's he won't have no kick. But there's Obed, Trey Wiggins, two tinhorns and a swamper—five voters. Reckon they won't be plumb drowned in the rest of the votes?"

It was so decided and the petition was sent to the Territorial Legislature. Then came a long period of waiting. In the meantime the Lucky Gal blazed its evil lights through windows and batwings across the dusty road.

(Turn to page 98)

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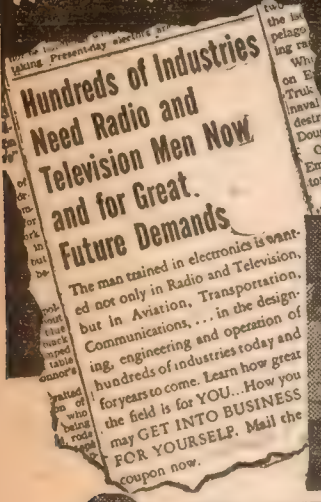
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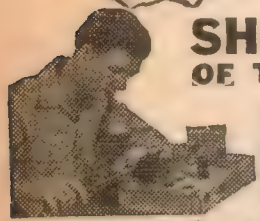

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Its garish tinsel attracted the wild young bucks of the ranches and most of the miners along Dog Leg. After a week of hard labor with pick, shovel and pan, the burly miners were in a mood to raise the lid and put a chunk under it.

On Saturday night, the Lucky Gal never closed. It's tinny piano banged during the long night hours. Fights frequently broke out, starting in the saloon and ending in the street, ringed by howling men who urged the fighters on. The Reverend Carter looked more grim as time passed. This one, festering spot had changed Rawhide from a peaceful, forward looking town into a place that was almost like the hell-roaring end-of-track villages.

It seemed to grow worse and Lem Adams was hard pressed to keep peace in the town. Men like Peg Strickland and Breck lost their patience and suggested that Colt law was quick and certain. Lem managed to keep them in line until word would come from the Territorial capitol.

At last it came. The boundaries of Rawhide had been confirmed, its existence as a town corporation granted. The citizens would hold an election as soon as possible. Lem read it to an eager group in the store, his voice ringing. He finished the legal document and looked up, eyes shining.

"Rawhide! It's a sure-for-real town now, gents. I dreamed some day she would be. Now, when are we going to elect our mayor and our councilmen? Who'll they be?"

The men looked at one another, puzzled. Reverend Carter raised his hands for attention.

"I've only been in Rawhide a short time, but I know there's only one man who should be the first mayor of our town," he said. "Lem Adams!"

Lem flushed at the cheer, waited until it had subsided. "Yuh'd best leave that to the voters. They can write the name of the gent they want and drop it in the ballot box. Likewise with the town council which, by the law here, consists of three. Let's handle it that way. The man with most votes is mayor, the next three will be the town council."

"Who for marshal?" Peg asked.

"Reckon the mayor can appoint the first one," Lem said thoughtfully. "Leastways he's got that power until a regular election comes up for him two years from now. Let's call election day for a week from next Saturday. Folks got time that way to make up their minds."

So it was decided. All Rawhide was excited. Lem Adams seemed to be the only man mentioned for Mayor. Sturgis, Doc Renford and the Reverend Carter for the town council. Lem waited for some reaction from Obed Meyers. The saloonkeeper would know that his Lucky Gal was endangered.

ON THE third day after the authorization had arrived, Obed and Trey came swaggering into the store.

"Let's see that there law writin' yuh got," Obed demanded. Lem handed it to him and silently waited while Obed read it completely through. The saloonkeeper finished, returned it to Lem.

"Does the Lucky Gal get to vote?" he demanded harshly.

"Any gent livin' in Rawhide on election day votes this first time," Lem said coldly. "We don't like yore crowd none, Meyers, but we won't keep yuh from votin'."

"Five votes," Obed said bitterly. "This whole thing was fixed so yuh could close me up, Adams."

"Partly," Lem agreed. "But partly because Rawhide's big enough to have its mayor and the rest of it."

"I'm not goin' to be run out," Obed said. "I hear a lot about yuh bein' mayor with no trouble whatsoever. Folks figure the town council will sort of be hand-picked out of yore bunch, Adams."

"We've always done our best for Rawhide," Lem said. "That's more'n yuh could say if yuh'd lived here twenty years."

Obed bellied up to the counter, eyes slitted, knuckles rapping on the wood. "Yuh figgered without Obed Meyers. I'm runnin' for mayor of this here town and Trey will be the marshal. I reckon two of my boys will be enough on the council. Rawhide's in for a surprise, Adams."

He turned and strode out of the store. Trey shoved his hat forward over his eyes and critically examined his soiled black vest. He pointed to a spot on the left side and grinned crookedly at Lem.

"I'll pin the star right there. Look mighty nice, too." He waved his hand in a mock salute and followed Obed from the store.

As election day drew near, the subdued

(Turn to page 100)

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excitement beneath Rawhide's sleepy exterior grew in intensity. Lem was constantly assured that he would be mayor. But whenever he listened to the noise from the Lucky Gal, the old storekeeper wasn't so sure. He didn't see what Obed Meyers could do with just five votes against the rest of the town, and that worried Lem. Obed Meyers wasn't a man to make rash statements unless he knew of some underhand way of backing them.

It wasn't until the night before election day that Rawhide learned what Obed planned to do. Several wagons came rolling down the War Bonnet road, each vehicle filled with men and supplies. Lem watched the procession from the canopied store porch. Most of the passengers in the wagon were drunk and singing at the top of their voices. The wagons wheeled in beside the Lucky Gal and came to a halt. The passengers streamed over the side and crowded into Meyers' saloon.

"Now what yuh reckon that is?" Peg Strickland asked. He had come up behind Lem and he frowned toward the Lucky Gal. Lem shrugged.

"Blasted convention, looks like."

"Graders, if my ears hear right," Peg spat into the dust. Lem had started for the door but he halted abruptly, swinging around.

"Graders? All that crowd?"

"From what I could see," Peg nodded. Lem whistled, light dawning in his eyes.

"From the railroad that built into Pinto! Track hands, men who have swilled Meyers' whisky along the rails. Jumping Judas! That's what he plans. Watch the store, Peg!"

Lem hurried across the street to the New Deck and then around the corner. He returned in a few moments with the Reverend Carter. The men came pouring out of the Lucky Gal and back to the wagons. They unloaded their equipment and soon a veritable jungle of small tents arose in the rear of the saloon. Obed Meyers and Trey Wiggin stood to one side, watching and directing the activity.

Lem led Dent and Carter to the Lucky Gal. They came up to Obed who grinned at them and waved his hand toward the innumerable tents.

"Lem Adams, meet the new citizens of Rawhide. Each and every one votes for Obed Meyers, who'll be the first Mayor."

"They just come," Lem snapped. "They don't live here."

"I've read the law," Obed said, still grinning. "Them tents is all inside the town limits. Them gents live here, Lem, and yuh can't say they don't. By yore own rulin' they'll be able to vote tomorrow. Now yuh figger yore way out of this one."

Obed guffawed and turned to enter the saloon. At the door, he stopped and looked over his shoulder at Lem Adams and Dent Sturgis.

"Yuh know, the new mayor might close up a certain saloon in this town," Obed sneered. "It ain't run to suit him. Yep, the New Deck is sure goin' to be only a memory come the day after election."

Lem grabbed Dent's arm as the man took an angry step forward. Obed chuckled again and disappeared inside the Lucky Gal. The three men watched the track hands pitch their tents. Obed had seen that each and every one of them was inside the town limits. At last Lem, Carter, and Dent turned dispiritedly away and trudged back to the store. They slumped on upturned boxes around the black stove, staring dully down at the floor.

At last Lem raised his head.

"We done cut our own throats, looks like," he said. "Every blasted one of them sons can vote."

"Day after election, they'll be gone," Dent grunted.

"That's what makes me plumb sick," Lem snarled. Carter sighed and moved up the aisle to the door and back again.

"It looks as if we've given Rawhide over to the forces of evil unless we can think of some way to stop Meyers," the clergyman said. "Right now, I don't see how it can be done. Maybe persuasion might work."

Breck Long's harsh laugh cut him short. "Persuasion, Parson? Yuh don't have the kind Obed Meyers and Trey Wiggin understand. I do, and it's got six slugs."

"I'll try my way first," Carter snapped. He turned on his heel and walked out of the store. In short order he had reached the Lucky Gal and pushed through the half doors. The place was crowded. Obed saw the preacher and came over to him, smiling.

"Howdy, Sky Pilot," Obed cried. "Take a look at my boys. They're Rawhide voters, every son of 'em."

"You rung them in," Carter said quietly. "Has it ever struck you, Meyers, that cheating tricks have a habit of kicking back?"

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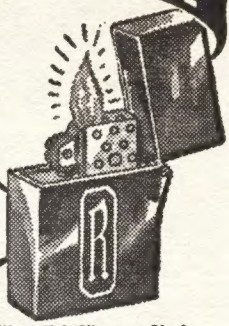

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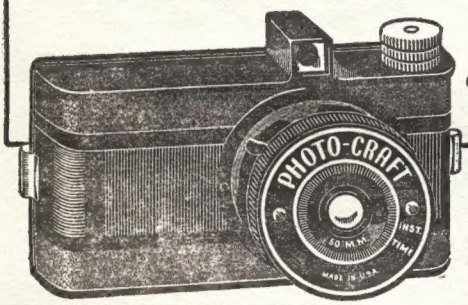

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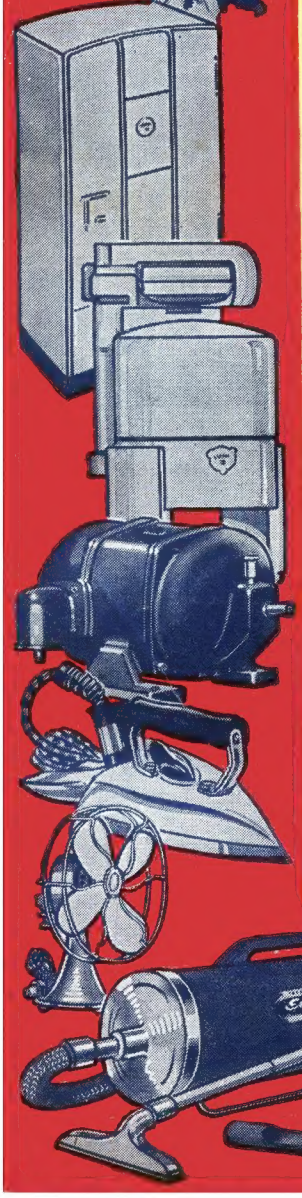

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